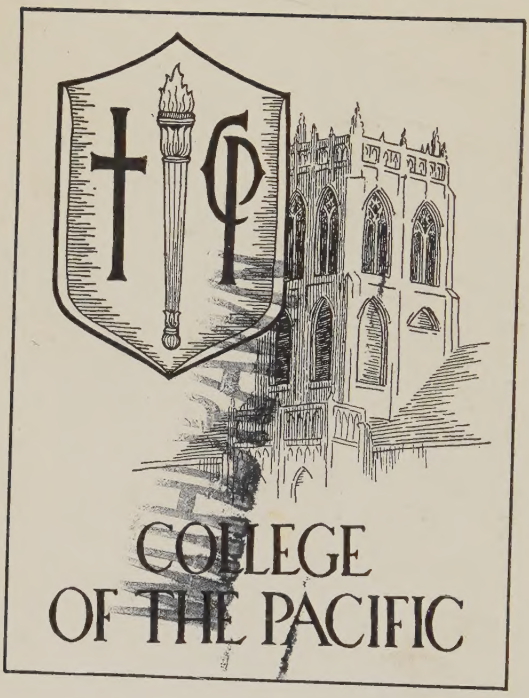
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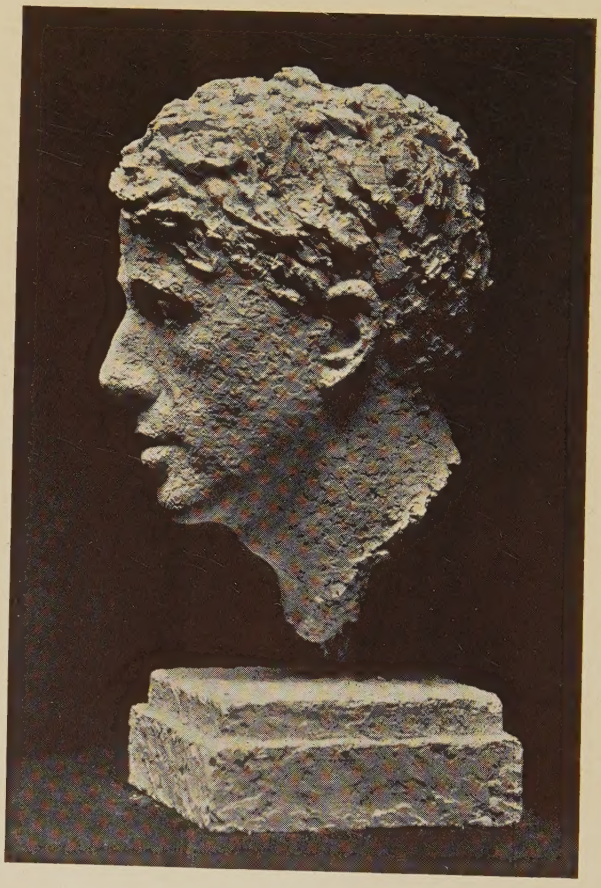

ROBERT FROST

From the original in plaster

by AROLDO DU CHÊNE

# AMERICAN POETRY SINCE 1900

BY

LOUIS UNTERMEYER

AUTHOR OF "CHALLENGE," "THESE TIMES," "ROAST LEVIATHAN," ETC.

NEW YORK
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*This Personal Portrait-Gallery*

# AMERICAN POETRY
# SINCE 1900

17487

# PREFACE

THIS volume, although changed in substance as well as in name, is based on a previous collection of essays, "The New Era in American Poetry." Several of the pages stand, with the addition of certain data, practically as they appeared in the earlier book, but most of the chapters are either new or have been entirely rewritten. In the six years that have elapsed since The New Era was constructed, a great quantity of literary water and no little controversial blood has gone under our bridges. Conditions change, supply fresh food for thought, and the sensitive palate acquires new powers of taste. One's own judgments must be reëxamined, and, after such a period, either reëstablished or revised.

This summary endeavors to be, at one time, a reëstablishment and revision. Where the author has, in his first survey of the field of contemporary poetry, done less than justice to certain workers in it, he has here attempted a more detailed analysis. It is inevitable that any appraisal should be incomplete and, since individual taste is the prompter that directs the voice of judgment, the author can explain his résumés and omissions only by admitting his unavoidable bias. Answering the question of prejudice, he can only affirm the charge and proceed to publish his conclusion that art itself is nothing more than a reaction to as well as a record of the things one loves or hates, and that criticism is merely an annotated explanation of these likes and dislikes. Human beings are impelled or inhibited by a complex of disturb-

ances and associations, and there can be an impersonal critic only in the sense that there can be an impersonal person. What we recognize as the successfully "detached" critic is merely one who is able to conceal his preferences or prejudices at the very time he is attempting, paradoxically enough, to make others agree with him. Who is without temperament and who, having enough of it to criticize others, can be free or even wish to be free of its determinism? What do we all seek in art but an identification or a justification of ourselves? What is the critic's praise but the delight of Narcissus at seeing his own face in the pool; what is his displeasure but his failure to find that flattering image? "We only perceive those things to which we are attuned," says Conrad Aiken in a not altogether disingenuous *apologia pro specie sua,* "and no matter, therefore, how we spin a logic in defense of our tastes, all we do is subtilize the net of our temperament, the snare of our imperious desires, from which we are never destined to escape."

In spite of this admission, which is also an apology for whatever accents of finality may arise from the following wholly relative speculations, the author hopes that these summaries suggest more than his particular conclusions. The part he has played in the revival of the most varied if not the most vigorous period in American literature is sufficiently small so that he may be allowed a measure of disinterested enthusiasm. To those who are convinced that he has failed to make out a case, he requests a careful examination of the numerous exhibits, the significant quotations which speak emphatically for themselves—by permission of the poets and the publishers, acknowledgment to whom is made in the text itself. A further acknowledgment is made to *The New Republic, The Freeman, The Dial, The Nation, The Literary Review,* and *The Bookman,* in whose columns parts of some of these chapters originally appeared.

In an effort to illustrate the diversity of recent American poetry, most of the poets have been arranged in groups. It may be objected, and with perfect validity, that the divisions are sometimes arbitrary, that certain poets might with equal justice be placed in another group or, for that matter, in two or three groups. In such cases, the more pronounced aspect of the poet's work has been the determining factor. The first two divisions are not an effort to establish relative importance, but to define those poets who interpret life from the realistic standpoint apart from those whose approach is from the æsthetic angle. It remains to say that the groups are not intended to oppose but to complement each other.

*L. U.*

*New York, 1923*

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# AMERICAN POETRY
# SINCE 1900

"I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear . . .
Each singing his . . . each singing what belongs to her, and to none else . . .
Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs."

*Walt Whitman.*

"The poetry of exaltation will be always the highest; but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life and cannot write poetry of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops."

*J. M. Synge.*

". . . these and more branching forth into numberless branches.
Always the free range and diversity!
Always the continent of Democracy!"

*Walt Whitman.*

# INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND

To appreciate the variety which has distinguished American poetry since 1900, it is necessary to understand not alone the immediate conditions that created it, but the preceding period which was both its impulse and point of departure. If Whitman acted as a sharp precipitant upon American literature, he himself was precipitated by the conventions of his day. The New England poets had withdrawn into their libraries; Longfellow, Bryant, Taylor turned their tired eyes from the troubled domestic scene to a rose-tinted Europe, transported themselves to a prettified past, abandoned original writing for translation and other methods of evasion. Here was an effort to escape a reality they could neither understand nor express; a retreat, in the midst of political and industrial reconstruction, to a tempered Hellenism, to a comforting, devitalized Orient. "My soul to-day Is far away, Sailing the Vesuvian Bay," crooned Thomas Buchanan Read; "From the Desert I come to thee, On a stallion shod with fire," sang Bayard Taylor; "Thou little girl of Astrakhan, I join thee on the silk divan," responded Richard Henry Stoddard; "O Love, if you were only here, Beside me in this mellow light, 'Twould be a true Arabian night!" echoed T. B. Aldrich. Into this musty, middle-aged Arcadia, the breath of Whitman blew like a stinging wind, bringing the salt of tossing seas, the dark tang of the earth. It was a more vigorous Muse, lovelier as well as livelier, that Whitman invoked when he cried out in protest against those who were seeking glamour not in man's life but in other men's books:

Come, Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia.
Cross out, please, those immensely overpaid accounts;
That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas' and Odysseus' wanderings.
Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus. . . .
For know a better, fresher, busier sphere; a wider, untried domain awaits and demands you.

It was an inclusive nationalism that Whitman championed —not an arrogant chauvinism. It is to his credit—and, to a greater extent than has been acknowledged, to the spiritual influence of Emerson—that our literature has become so frankly indigenous. We have, to-day, art in America that is, differing from the imitative product of the past generations, actually American. Until recently our paintings filled endless galleries with rearrangements of Greek slaves, Italian skies, German genres, French theories. Our sculpture was mainly a set of variations of a Virginian landowner (usually George Washington) in a Roman toga, and a Roman senator (usually Daniel Webster) in a pair of baggy, bronze trousers. Our architecture had expressed itself by planning long rows of English basements, placing miniature Egyptian pyramids and Gothic gargoyles on the tops of skyscrapers, trying to make our libraries, banks, terminals and motion-picture palaces look like Sunday-supplement restorations of the Parthenon, the Campanile and the baths of Caracalla. Our music, until the last decade or two, had been a series of sentimentalized echoes of the least original German *lieder,* adulterated and sweetened by drawing-room Moodys and Sankeys—while our real contributions to music (the negro spirituals, the bold, aboriginal dance-rhythms of the Indians, our highly characteristic ragtime syncopation) was scorned until a Bohemian revealed to us the dignity of our idioms in The New World Symphony, and MacDowell,

strongly indebted to the Norwegian Grieg, exploited the strength and sonority of American Indian melodies.

And poetry? It scarcely differed from the other arts in its absence of individuality. Even the famous New England group, in spite of certain outstanding performances, lacked that intense impact of personality without which great art has never been produced. The tones of one member of the group blurred and blended into the speech of another. It would be difficult for any but a student of the period to disassociate the verses of Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell (I except the satirical verses), if they were presented to him, without signatures, in any anthology—whereas even the most casual reader of contemporary poetry could recognize and differentiate the highly individualized accents of Frost, Sandburg, Robinson, Amy Lowell, "H. D.," Lindsay, et al. The poetry produced by the men of the older group proves how curiously colonial they were, how little they tried to rid themselves of their allegiance to established foreign traditions.

Perhaps the strongest factor that prevented these Americans from expressing themselves fully was a formula of conduct that was rooted in an old puritanism. This puritanism, with its dual code, its harsh insistence on impossible standards, on a high morality in public that every one violated in private, passed through three interesting stages. It developed first into a religious tyranny, then into a literary dictatorship and finally into the orgies of a virulent and inhibiting censorship, from which last phase we are only now emerging. The days immediately preceding the Civil War were dark with dogma and denial. The lips of the country were pursed into a continual *No!* The breaking of a taboo meant the ostracism not only of the man, but the suppression of all his work. Books will some day be written of the tragic resistance of Poe and Whitman, of their futile at-

tempts to stand against the juggernaut of Philistinism that plowed through their period. At no time in America was literature so unhuman, so little related to life. In his chapter on "Puritanism as a Literary Force," * H. L. Mencken, mordantly analyzing the dominance of this power, recites this circumstance:

"Fenimore Cooper filled his romances, not with the people about him, but with Indians beyond the sky-line, and made them half-fabulous to boot. Hawthorne turned backward to the Puritans of Plymouth Rock; Longfellow to the Acadians and the prehistoric Indians; Emerson took flight from the earth altogether; even Poe sought refuge in a land of fantasy. It was only the frank second-raters—*e.g.*, Whittier and Lowell—who ventured to turn to the life about them, and the banality of the result is a sufficient indication of the crudeness of the current taste, and the mean position assigned to the art of letters. This was preëminently the era of the moral tale, the Sunday-school book. Literature was conceived, not as a thing in itself, but merely as a handmaiden to politics or religion."

It was this sermonizing turn, a routine which encouraged the habit of pinning moral and irrelevant tags to purely descriptive pieces, that kept this eminently gifted group from becoming either the artistic pioneers or the prophets of a growing country that needed both. It prevented them from recording the huge, impersonal disturbances, the swift individual reactions, the clash of beauty and brutality. It made them concern themselves with elaborate and artificial conceits, with standardized ideals rather than disturbing ideas. Scarcely American at all but for its *habitat,* the New England group did not owe nearly as much to New England as it did to Old England.

Almost the opposite is true to-day. We are in the midst

* In *A Book of Prefaces,* by H. L. Mencken—(Alfred A. Knopf).

of one of those tremendous spiritual upheavals when, as in every crisis, the mind of man, grown more powerful and introspective, flashes into poetry. And the quality of that poetry is human, racy and vigorous; it is not only closer to the soil but nearer to the soul. Most of our poets have shaken themselves free, first of all from the pontifical rhetoric, the tag-end moralizing of our literary doctrinaires. And as they have rid themselves of the tradition of didacticism, they are growing clear of the tradition of prescribed romanticism.

By this, I do not mean that they are less romantic. On the contrary; they are merely less exclusive. They are readier to celebrate "the divine average," more alert to accept all of life and transmute it through the varying colors of their temperaments. Following Whitman, they have learned to employ material which had been hitherto regarded as too unpoetic for poetry. At least part of their credo might have been taken *verbatim* out of "Leaves of Grass":

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'œuvre of the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow, crunching with depressed head, surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels!

Poetry has swung back to actuality, to heartiness and lustihood. Latterly the most aristocratic of the arts, appreciated and fostered only by little salôns and erudite groups, poetry has suddenly torn away from its self-imposed strictures and is expressing itself once more in the terms of

democracy. It is no longer composed chiefly by scholars for scholars. It is democratic in the sense that a great part of it is written of the people, for the people and evidently—judging from the number of magazines devoted exclusively to its practise—by the people. Many who had regarded verse as a difficult exercise in preciosity, found that they could not only read it but enjoy it. They were no longer frustrated by their ignorance of the minor *amours* of the major Greek Deities; poetry had ceased to be a tiresome sight-seeing tour through Bulfinch's Classical Mythology. It was no longer necessary for them to follow it with a dictionary of rare and obsolete words. Life was their glossary, not literature.

This double return to the material of everyday life and to direct speech has been simultaneous. Whitman, with his "glory of the commonplace," was its prophet; Hovey and Carman (in their insurgent Vagabondia songs), Markham (in his challenging "Man With the Hoe"), Moody (in his passionate protests), the immediate forerunners. Whitman came with a double challenge; he assailed the intolerable prurience of the Puritans and outraged the æsthetic formalists of his period by taking his themes hot from the rude and raucous tumble of life. It was Whitman who, having lived on a rich and varied scale, touching the world at all extremes, gave voice to an immense and unassembled medley of races. And it was Whitman who, as Van Wyck Brooks aptly puts it, "precipitated the American character. All those things which had been separate, self-sufficient, incoördinate—action, theory, idealism, business—he cast into a crucible; and they emerged harmonious and molten, in a fresh, democratic ideal, which is based upon the whole personality. Every strong personal impulse, every coöperating and unifying impulse, everything that enriches the social background, everything that impels and clarifies in the modern world owes something to Whitman."

Whitman, as much the prophet as the poet, foretold this change in his little-known scenario for a lecture, *An American Primer,** a thin sketch of a book which throws a series of illuminating sidelights not only on his own aims but on the problem of speech in literature. In furtherance of his belief that the whole "Leaves of Grass" was mainly a gigantic language experiment, an effort towards a democratic poetry, he said, "It is an attempt to give the spirit, the body and the man, new words, new potentialities of speech—an American, a cosmopolitan (for the best of America is the best cosmopolitanism) range of self-expression." He also wrote: "The Americans are going to be the most fluent and melodious-voiced people in the world—the most perfect users of words. . . . The new times, the new people, the new vista need a tongue according—yes, and what is more they will have such a tongue."

It was Whitman's use of the rich verbal material that flowered in the street rather than in libraries that gave him such potency. That large spirit was set free and made common to all men, not so much because of his form and philosophy, but because of his words. And it was this love and sublimation of what was racy that made him so great an artistic influence, an influence that was not only liberal but liberating. With his elemental dynamism, his desire to strike off chains rather than put up bars, he might be called —if rhetoric were permitted—the Lincoln of our literature.

From what, it has been asked, has the American poet been set free? From an enforced deference to a colonial culture, from a vague eloquence, from a preoccupation with a "poetic" past, from the repeating of echoes and glib superficials. He has been transferred to a moving world from a lifeless and literary storehouse—from an old attic of dusty

* *An American Primer,* by Walt Whitman. Edited by Horace Traubel—(Small, Maynard & Co.).

mythological statues, Rogers' groups, gilded conch shells, embroidered mottoes. It is likely that he may go to the other extreme. He may use the chambered nautilus chiefly for dissection; he may call the village blacksmith from under his spreading chestnut-tree only in an effort to psychoanalyze him. The poet is no less the child of his age than the daily reader of the "news." Though an artist, he too may burn, in the universal passion for revelation, to tell the truth, the whole truth and—unfortunately too often—nothing but the truth. But even this is a natural reaction to the time when romantic falsification was the fashion, when reticence was likely to be nothing more charming than a repression. It is an age of ferment, and the poets, its most sensitive mirrors, reflect the flux and diversity of a period whose development may find still stranger forms.

And what has the modern poet been set free for? To look candidly at the world he lives in; to study and synthesize the startling fusion of races and ideas, the limitless miracles of science and its limitless curiosity, the growth of liberal thought, the groping and stumbling toward a social ideal—the welter and struggle and beauty of modern life. He has been set free to face these. For even though he tries to recreate the tunes of an antique lyricist, listening only to the echoes of a thousand years, he will find it hard to escape his times.

And that escape has become increasingly difficult. The wireless, the rural free delivery, the radio, the omniscient newspapers follow him everywhere. No matter how distant his hiding-place, he cannot get away from the world's restless activities; the tiniest hamlet rocks and responds to the stress of the whole world. The retreat to the ivory tower is blocked on every side.

Not that escape is impossible; the blockade may be evaded. Like Keats, the poet may fly to a strange and soothing an-

tiquity. Like Walter De la Mare, he can exchange the conflict of the daily encounter for a region inhabited only by children, echoes and elves. Or like Poe, he may build and populate a moonstruck and misty No Man's Land. But unless he can make his world as actual and convincing as our own, he will have failed—even in his escape, and certainly in his poetry.

And it is this difference that is shown in the temper of most of our poets: they are not anxious to escape. They are not frightened or disgusted with their times; they are fascinated by them. They are in love with their world, passionately, sometimes painfully. It may be urged that this might be said of the first poets of any time, that the artist has always been intensely interested in his age and has, consciously or unconsciously, reflected it. But, above all, what distinguishes this age is its probing quality, its insatiable lust for knowledge, its determined self-analysis. And, it is not, as in the past, the rare interpretative power of one great mind that stands out. It is the steady drive of the mind of man now turned on itself as well as on its environment. In every field—from the artistic to the political—one sees this restless searching, this effort towards new values, toward ascertaining larger possibilities. I said before that the artist had been set free for a clear look at his own age. It would have been truer to say that he is being set free for a clear look at himself. . . .

The following chapters are an attempt to record and analyze the various manifestations of this purpose.

1

# ROBERT FROST

It is a curious circumstance that the most representative interpreter of New England was born in San Francisco. But atavism or an unconscious nostalgia or something beyond the accident of geography had plans of its own and, at the age of ten, Robert (Lee) Frost came back to the New Hampshire hills where, for eight generations, his forefathers had established themselves. All these generations—and more—speak in his folk-flavored idiom, a speech that is taken from the people themselves. His intimacy with New England, however, is not merely racial and intuitive; at various periods, Frost was a bobbin-boy in one of the Lawrence mills, a worker in a shoe-factory, editor of a country newspaper, a teacher and a farmer. These varied labors carried him, as a poet, far from the moral conceits and capitalized quaintness of the typical Yankee writers; it brought him to the gnarled heart of the countryside. Having shared and suffered its quiet tragedies and quieter comedies, he could express, with a richness and simplicity unsurpassed in American poetry, the spiritual action beneath its physical actualities. The mending of a wall in Spring, a patch of old snow, the gathering of blueberries, an empty cottage, a dried-up brook, two people moving into a new house, another couple coming home to an old one—these subjects are not used as themes for decorative embroidery but are invested with the double force of observation and implication. In one of his shortest poems, a recent lyric, is revealed the subtlety by which Frost sounds spiritual overtones above the actual theme.

The way a crow
  Shook down on me
The dust of snow
  From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
  A change of mood
And saved some part
  Of a day I had rued.

Here is no specious sermonizing. The moral—if there is one—is barely implied. If one wishes to draw the symbolism that a crow can shake off, in one movement, snow from a branch and despair from the soul, that the blackest can startle us with the whitest, Frost would be the last to complain. But, were one to see nothing but the picture, Frost would be the last to prod the point. To him, nothing is so rounded, so satisfying as the fact; it is the consummation of his art. In his first volume, there is one poem that crystallizes his attitude to life; in its illumination of Frost's combined power—sight and insight—it might stand as a symbol of his work.

MOWING

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf;
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak

To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

*"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."* At first glance this seems a bare absurdity, an easy trick. But observe the hundreds who, lacking the making touch, have attempted it and failed miserably. It is not so difficult to write actual poetry; "factual" poetry is another matter. What betrays the average writer is its seeming simplicity. He begins honestly enough but, within two or three lines, he is tottering on the edge of a banality. To avoid this, he retreats on to the familiar ground of a poeticism, turns quickly toward a *cliché* or a slight æsthetic exaggeration,—and tumbles suddenly into something that is neither truth nor poetry. The sensitive artist rarely tries to amplify the fact; he considers himself fortunate if he can even approximate it.

This insistence on the fact may make Frost out to be a realist. And I imagine that Frost would not scorn the appellation; in fact, I think he would wear it with a quaint pride. For Frost is a most romantic person and, as such, a realistic poet. By that I am far from attempting an exercise in paradox. It may, however, be well to point out that the purely romantic writer is dealing in a stuff that is the general property and known secret of a multitude. The realist, on the other hand, must dare the commonplace; he must pick his own route among a thousand trodden paths,—a far harder task than adventuring into the fanciful where none can question him. Both travelers are after beauty; both are beckoned on by mystery. But the realist loves it, as he loves life, for its difficulties and hardships; because of its rudeness and rigors, even more than in spite of them. The romanticist is in love with ideas about life—ideas which every one loves; a more obvious beauty, a less mysterious mystery.

But, though his verse has the rhythm of common speech and his characters are rooted in realism, Frost is never the photographic realist. His lines are lifted above mere repre-

sentation by a clarity of phrase, a cleanness of epithet, a condensation that, without leaving the tones of conversation, continually tightens into epigram. "There are," Frost once said, "two types of realist: the one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real one, and the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I'm inclined to be the second kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form."

This much of the Frostian characteristic having been established, a chronological survey will illuminate other matters besides Frost's progress. *A Boy's Will* (published originally in 1913 by David Nutt, London, and in America by Henry Holt and Company in 1914) is a first volume that owes little to any other poet except its title for which, curiously enough, it is indebted to Longfellow. It is frankly a subjective volume which the author, not so frankly, has tried to unify by a table of contents with program notes in the form of sub-captions. Thus: 1. "Into My Own"—*The youth is persuaded that he will be rather more than less himself for having forsworn the world.* 2. "Ghost House"—*He is happy in society of his own choosing.* 3. "My November Guest"—*He is in love with being misunderstood* . . . and similar efforts to make the separate poems into a progressive whole.

What really unifies the volume is nothing more binding than the spirit of youth and a groping towards an original expression. Here and there, one encounters turns of speech that are as recognizably Frost as anything in the later books. But the concentrated emotion, the close-packed psychology of *North of Boston,* is only suggested by such lyrics as "Into My Own," "Reluctance," "The Tuft of Flowers" and a few others. Perhaps the most characteristic poem in the volume is one in which we have not only the feeling but the technic of Frost's later work.

STORM FEAR

When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow
The lower chamber window on the east,
And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
The beast,
"Come out! Come out!"—
It costs no inward struggle not to go,
Ah, no!
I count our strength,
Two and a child,
Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,—
How the drifts are piled,
Dooryard and road ungraded,
Till even the comforting barn grows far away
And my heart owns a doubt
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided.

As a pendant to "Mowing," which I have quoted, "The Tuft of Flowers" has a particular significance. And it has a further value as one of Frost's few explicit declarations. Much of his work is the art of *litotes,* a not ineffective method in these forthright days. Where most of his contemporaries assert their praise in loud assurance, Frost's appreciations are all the keener for being couched in what seems a hesitant affirmation. "The Tuft of Flowers" is exceptional in that, instead of being an understatement, it definitely proclaims the comradeship of labor, a fellowship that finds its credo in the last two couplets:

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

"Men work together," I told him from the heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."

I doubt if any book has ever had a quainter introduction

than the fly-leaf poem of *North of Boston* (Henry Holt and Company, 1915). Here is not only a complete picture in eight delicately etched lines but one of the most intriguing invitations ever offered to the reader. One is prepared not only for the poet's metier but the poet himself.

THE PASTURE

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

In *North of Boston,* Frost found his own full utterance and himself. It is, as he calls it, a "book of people." And it is more than that. It is a book of a people, of the folk of New England, of New England itself with its hard hills and harder certainties, its repressions, its cold humor and inverted tenderness. Against this background, Frost has placed some of the most poignant and dramatic poems that the age has produced, perhaps the most authentic and powerful that have ever come out of America. These dramas, sometimes in dialogue, sometimes in monologue, are the antithesis of the "arranged" and carefully planned pieces of stagecraft. There is a total absence of all the skilful literary mechanics that we have been used to. Discarding these theatrical accessories, Frost has taken the drama out into the air; he lets the sunlight play over his Yankee scenes and allows his actors to talk in a language that is rich and living. No one since Synge has put so much of the sharp tang of country life into dramatic poetry; and here, as in Synge's work, every speech is as "fully flavored as a nut or an apple,"

a language that is colloquial and colorful. Another thing that gives these poems so potent an illusion of reality is the absence of the guiding hand of the creator; the figures live and breathe and move of their own desire and necessity. And they are illumined by nothing so much as an intense sympathy, a light that does not merely set off these figures. It penetrates them. It reaches down through his people to their roots; it strikes the soil from which they grew. It even transforms the whole countryside and makes it something more than an effective background. It gives the setting the power of an immense and moving actor in the lives of folk it overshadows.

The first poem in *North of Boston,* taking up the theme of communal labor where "A Tuft of Flowers" left it, is a subtle interplay of both country and character.

MENDING WALL

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing;
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"

We wear our fingers rough with handling them,
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more.
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good
neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"*Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But there there are
no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves"
to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good
neighbours."

Beneath the quaintness, the sheer loveliness of poetic expression, we have, in two pages, the contrasted souls of two people. And here a strange thing is encountered. Many of Frost's most striking characters are revealed in a single line; some of them without even a word. In this poem, for instance, the portrayal of the second person is fully as keen as that of the speaker, though it is suggested rather than drawn. The man who repeats his inherited maxim, "Good

fences make good neighbours," stands out as clearly as though the artist had put in every wrinkle and trouser-crease. In his stolid reiteration of the one sentence, one sees his father behind him and his father's fathers stretching back in a vague row; a whole line of unquestioning, dogmatizing generations. And it is after one has finished the poem that its power persists and grows. It takes on the quality of natural symbolism; of two elemental and opposed forces. In its dispute about border-lines, we have the essence of nationalism *vs.* the internationalist. Beneath the whimsical anarchy of the one and the blind, literal insistence of the other, one senses the endless struggle between a pagan irresponsibility and a strict accountability. It is not just a conflict between the old and the new New England; it is an echo of natures as primitive as Law and Revolution.

If here is an instance of how much power and personality can be condensed in one spoken line, it will be interesting to observe how several of Frost's characterizations do not speak, do not even appear. The high-hearted adventurer in "The Wood-Pile," that unknown, careless rover, continually turning to fresh tasks, is indelibly portrayed although he is never seen. The same is true of the worn-out incompetent in "The Death of the Hired Man," possibly the finest piece of *genre* painting ever attempted in our poetry, and that positive tight-lipped old lady in "The Black Cottage."

This power is intensified in the longer delineations. In "A Servant to Servants," we have an unforgettable study of insanity, the dull degeneration of a life that was already dragged down. "Home Burial" is a tense domestic tragedy that is the more terrible since the end comes with a swift uncertainty, a poem that is worthy to be placed beside "The Death of the Hired Man." Frost's power assumes darker colors and even more tragic proportions in "The Fear," where, after a threatening beginning, the *dénouement,* a

swift anti-climax, is far more forceful than any violence could be.

It is such situations that, at first reading, make much of *North of Boston* seem determinedly grim. But here is by no means an overinsistent grimness. Those who have found this poetry drab or unrelievedly gray are those whose senses, glutted with crude colors, can no longer distinguish a multitude of shades. The rigors of lonely farms, the stern hardships are not softened but thrown into bolder relief by the quizzical philosophy that acts as a running commentary; even the gravest of Frost's monologues are told with gestures of fanciful by-play. There is an elfin raillery in the very midst of "Mending Wall"; fantasy takes possession of the exquisite "After Apple-Picking." And, more frequently than has been discovered, Frost's humor is often declared and downright. It gives "The Mountain" and "The Generations of Men" their ironic pungence; in "A Hundred Collars" it assumes the tone of jovial narrative that is always about to break into a laugh; in "The Code" it is nothing more (or less) than a richly elaborated joke.

This matter of humor again brings up the question of speech and, more particularly, of inflection. One of the criticisms still heard is that these poems are not essentially of New England, since Frost does not use dialect. Here we are back at the romanticist fallacy. For "dialect" *per se* is not at all typical of New England to-day; the only place where one can be sure of hearing it is in revivals of "The Old Homestead" and at the Palace Vaudeville Theater in New York. But the matter goes deeper, for dialect is not a mere set of abbreviations and a few typographical tricks. It is, particularly in Frost's case, inherent in the way that the words are grouped and shape themselves. Here we have speech so arranged and translated that the speaker is heard on the printed page; any reader will be led by the very kind

and color of these words into reproducing the actual tone in which they are supposed to be uttered. This flexible, conversational blank verse establishes the delicate connection between the vernacular and the language of literature.

It is Frost's insistence that "all poetry is the reproduction of the tones of actual speech" that gives these poems not merely a quickly-communicated emotional appeal but the deepest power of which words are capable—the power to transmit significant and individualized sounds. Such sounds are only significant when the words which they form still retain most of their original value; they are strongest when the word is still racy and active. When they have had the original strength or beauty wrung out of them (in the way that "grand," "wonderful," "daybreak" and "lovely" have suffered), the words are not alone empty as sounds, they are colorless even in their literal application. Alice's paraphrase is not only a practical but a poetical bit of advice concerning words: "Take care of the sounds and the sense will take care of itself." And one must actually take care of them, treasure them, conserve them; not squander the sounds with the prodigality of a Swinburne. "Sometimes I have my doubts of words altogether," wrote Frost in what might be called an unofficial document, "and I ask myself what is the place of them. They are worse than nothing unless they do something; unless they amount to deeds, as in ultimatums or battle-cries. They must be flat and final like the showdown in poker, from which there is no appeal. My definition of poetry (if I were forced to give one) would be this: words that have become deeds."

In the light of these conclusions, it is doubly informative to turn to *Mountain Interval* (Henry Holt and Company, 1916). Here again we have Frost writing about New England in a way that expresses more than New England. We have the same rich and simple language, the sharp disclosure

of character, the honesty of values. Frost—and this recent volume is an added proof—is one of the few living poets who have never padded a phrase, never larruped an emotion. Here again we find the poet who extends our literary borders not only with fresh sight but with fresh sounds. These sounds, let in from the walks of everyday, are full of a robust and creative energy; they are red corpuscles to the pallid blood of our poetic speech. This vigor of words is evident all through the volume, but it surges violently through the powerful drama "Snow" and fairly leaps from the lighter pages of "Birches," with its picturesque and personal revelation.

BIRCHES

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay.
Ice-storms do that. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are
bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in

With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate wilfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

But, it has been complained, if this is poetry, why does

it not *sing?* The question springs from the mistaken conception that all poetry is lyrical. And though the lyric may be the most quickly communicated and therefore the most popular form, there are two distinct types of verse: the poetry that can be chanted and the poetry that is meant to be spoken. The lines of Poe are essentially lines that sing; the words of Browning, even those in most of his lyrics, have the quality of talk; the blank verse of Shakespeare is an extraordinary mixture of both. Like Heine and Burns, Frost speaks in the idiom of his people but, unlike them, he has no tradition of song to fall back upon. Carl Van Doren has detailed and analyzed this difference in a significant paragraph:

"To compare Robert Frost, as he has often been compared, with Robert Burns, is to call attention at the outset to a difference between the Yankees and the Scots which has had a great effect upon the difference between these two poets. Burns grew up among a peasantry which sang. Not only were there ballads of the traditionary sort in every chimney-corner, but there were also gay tunes in the air ready for the new words of any new versifier. Even a genius like Burns in even his most characteristic lyrics was likely to owe some of his lines and the mold in which he cast them to old songs of love or laughter or defiance; and he was sure in such cases to owe to the fame of the older songs some part of the prosperity of his own. The ears of his hearers were already prepared for him. In rural New England, Robert Frost had no similar advantages. Almost the only tunes which had ever been lifted there had been the dry hymns of the churches. Ballad-making had died out; hilarious catches had rarely been trolled in cheerful taverns; youth did not sing its love, but talked when it did not merely hint. New England since the Revolution has had but one great popular orator; since "Yankee Doodle" only one popu-

lar patriotic song has come out of New England. The voice of that region is the voice of reason, of the intellect, of prose, canny or noble; it walks, not flies. There was nothing to encourage Mr. Frost to ride on the wings of established melodies."

But *Mountain Interval,* after justifying such plausible conclusions, contradicts them. Nothing in all of Frost is more beautiful and poignant than the lyrics which are scattered through his later work. *Mountain Interval,* like *North of Boston,* is rich in the blend of fact and fancy; in the intermingling of scenic loveliness and a psychological liveliness. So free and rushing a narrative as "The Bonfire," so quiet and tender a picture as "The Exposed Nest" are typical. And it is because of his unpretentious versatility that one is likely to forget how subtle and widespreading Frost's apparent restrictions are. While many of his *confrères* have been shouting a defiant radicalism or attitudinizing before their own twopenny innovations, Frost has gone on without stopping to challenge, a more daring innovator than any of them. Now, twenty years after his first efforts to bring the sound and color of actual speech back to poetry, a countryful of poets are themselves discovering what Frost has been dealing in, unheralded, ever since 1895. Nothing could better illustrate this pungent, talk-flavored blank verse than "Snow," "Out, Out—" and "In the Home Stretch." One was or should have been prepared for this.

But one came upon the lyrics with a kind of wonder. Yet they were the natural outcome of the first volume, a fuller and maturer expression of *A Boy's Will.* It is a surprising thing to see how little Frost has been influenced by any other poet and how little he has changed from the attitude assumed in his earliest work. The idiom has been deepened, the note amplified, the convictions have grown stronger. But the

essential thing has remained as he himself prophetically summed it up in the very first poem of the first book:

> They would not find me changed from him they knew—
> Only more sure of all I thought was true.

Nothing in all three volumes, to return to *Mountain Interval,* is more beautiful and poignant than these lyrics, than "An Old Man's Winter Night," the seeming inconsequence of "A Patch of Old Snow" (a poem which gives, more marvelously than any lines in our language, the effect of sheer tiredness) and the intensity of the little sequence called "The Hill Wife." Here are two of the latter series:

HOUSE FEAR

Always—I tell you this they learned—
Always at night when they returned
To the lonely house from far away
To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray,
They learned to rattle the lock and key
To give whatever might chance to be
Warning and time to be off in flight:
And preferring the out- to the in-door night,
They learned to leave the house-door wide
Until they had lit the lamp inside.

THE OFT-REPEATED DREAM

She had no saying dark enough
For the dark pine that kept
Forever trying the window-latch
Of the room where they slept.

The tireless but ineffectual hands
That with every futile pass
Made the great tree seem as a little bird
Before the mystery of glass!

It never had been inside the room,
And only one of the two
Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream
Of what the tree might do.

"An Old Man's Winter Night" is possibly the finest individual poem in the volume which, though less of a unit than *North of Boston,* contains some of Frost's most memorable poetry. No explanation of his romantically informed realism could begin to tell what is flashed before us in this extraordinary picture:

AN OLD MAN'S WINTER NIGHT

All out of doors looked darkly in at him
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
What kept him from remembering what it was
That brought him to that creaking room was age.
He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.
And having scared the cellar under him
In clomping there, he scared it once again
In clomping off;—and scared the outer night,
Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
But nothing so like beating on a box.
A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.
He consigned to the moon, such as she was,
So late-arising, to the broken moon
As better than the sun in any case
For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
His icicles along the wall to keep;
And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
One aged man—one man—can't fill a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It's thus he does it of a winter night.

Here we have, in an apparently inconsequential record, a

picture of old age; to be more precise, of an old man. But it is neither a poem about old age as the romanticist would write it nor a study of a typical old man as the realists might draw. If nothing else is apparent, this much is evident: there is nothing typical about the poem. The old man is a particular person, the room a particular room. It is only by inflection, scarcely by implication, that one gets the empty loneliness of all old men and the cold darkness of all outdoors.

These poems bring me back to the disputed matter of Frost's "gray outlook." Were no other proof to the contrary offered, *Mountain Interval* alone would be a sufficient answer to upset the charge. Here the humor has a lighter flow. Even in the midst of so gravely moving a passage as "An Old Man's Winter Night" there is the note of whimsical fantasy:

> He consigned to the moon, such as she was,
> So late-arising, to the broken moon,
> As better than the sun in any case
> For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
> His icicles along the wall. . . .

Throughout the volume there is a more genial inflection, a happier undercurrent. The spirit, as well as the music, is mellower. One can observe more clearly an unabashed turning to a secret or *sotto voce* play, to a sly raillery, a delight in fooling along with his theme. This is seen plainly in "Christmas Trees" and, in another phase, in the quaint silhouette of "An Encounter"; as a modern, quasi-Elizabethan conceit in "The Telephone"; in the self-satirizing, mock-pitying tone in "The Road Not Taken"; in the broad, bucolic humor of "Brown's Descent or The Willy-Nilly Slide"; in the equally broad couplets of this lively lyric:

THE COW IN APPLE TIME

Something inspires the only cow of late
To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit,
She scorns a pasture withering to the root.
She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

Against this etching, in a totally different manner though not in an altogether dissimilar mood, I would like to set the half-querulous, half-heroic poem that forms a sort of careless epilogue to the volume in

THE SOUND OF THE TREES

I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?
We suffer them by the day
Till we lose all measure of pace,
And fixity in our joys,
And acquire a listening air.
They are that that talks of going
But never gets away;
And that talks no less for knowing,
As it grows wiser and older,
That now it means to stay.
My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
From the window or the door.

I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

*New Hampshire* (Henry Holt and Company, 1923) synthesizes Frost's conflicting qualities; it combines the stark unity of *North of Boston* and the geniality of *Mountain Interval*. Here Frost's quaintness manifests itself even in the arrangement of the book; he offers the contents of this volume as a series of explanatory notes (and grace-notes) to the title-poem which is supposed to be the book's *raison d'être*. These "explanatory notes" could well be a complete and separate work; they are some of the finest narratives that Frost, or any American poet, has produced. They prove that Frost allowed seven years to elapse before publishing *New Hampshire* not because his imaginative power was running thin but because his standards are unusually high. The lines are more scrupulously polished than ever, the scope even wider. The inclusions range from the brightly colored "Wild Grapes" (a companion picture to "Birches") to the passionately somber "The Census Taker"; from "Paul's Wife," with its half-mournful, half-mocking accents, to "The Witch of Coös," with its incongruous mixture of prattle and terror. All of these are remarkable in the strength of outline and surety of composition, but it is in the seemingly parenthetical phrases, the ruminative asides that we have the distillation of Frost.

This house in one year fallen to decay
Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses
Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years
Where Asia wedges Africa from Europe.

So Frost, in "The Census Taker," continues a soliloquy which might well be autobiographical, ending on a characteristic note of quizzical pathos:

> The melancholy of having to count souls
> Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
> Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.

The added aside is capable of continual surprise. Here, in the mouth of a gossipy country witch, is a segment of one of the most remarkable ghost-stories in our poetry, the effect of which is heightened by the very homely tone in which it is narrated. The bones of the woman's dead lover have left the cellar and, carrying themselves "like a pile of dishes," have begun to mount the steps. The old lady is telling the tale:

> I never could have done the thing I did
> If the wish hadn't been too strong in me
> To see how they were mounted for this walk.
> I had a vision of them put together
> Not like a man, but like a chandelier.
> So suddenly I flung the door wide on him.
> A moment he stood balancing with emotion,
> And all but lost himself. (A tongue of fire
> Flashed out and licked along his upper teeth.
> Smoke rolled inside the sockets of his eyes.)
> Then he came at me with one hand outstretched,
> The way he did in life once; but this time
> I struck the hand off brittle on the floor,
> And fell back from him on the floor myself.
> The finger-pieces slid in all directions.
> (Where did I see one of those pieces lately?
> Hand me my button-box—it must be there.)

No less Frost, though in a totally different and far more intimate key, is "Wild Grapes," an admirable example of

the poet's fluctuating gayety and gravity. Its cadence, after the liveliest philosophizing, has this sudden illumination:

> I had not taken the first step in knowledge;
> I had not learned to let go with the hands,
> As still I have not learned to with the heart.

If one were forced to select four of the longer poems from this collection, I imagine the quartet would consist of "Wild Grapes," "The Census Taker," "The Star-Splitter," and "Paul's Wife." "The Star-Splitter" is the story of a man who, "having failed at huggermugger farming," burns his house down for the fire insurance and spends the proceeds on a telescope "to satisfy a lifelong curiosity about our place among the infinities." This is its circumlocutory and highly characteristic beginning:

> "You know Orion always comes up sideways.
> Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains,
> And rising on his hands, he looks in on me
> Busy outdoors by lantern-light with something
> I should have done by day-light, and indeed,
> After the ground is frozen, I should have done
> Before it froze, and a gust flings a handful
> Of waste leaves at my smoky lantern chimney
> To make fun of my way of doing things,
> Or else fun of Orion's having caught me.
> Has a man, I should like to ask, no rights
> These forces are obliged to pay respect to?"

This poem, possibly more than any other, reveals Frost's translation of much that is New England. Here are many of its phases, including that amplification of a joke into a gesture of beauty.

> Out of a house and so out of a farm
> At one stroke (of a match), Brad had to turn
> To earn a living on the Concord railroad,
> As under-ticket-agent at a station

Where his job, when he wasn't selling tickets,
Was setting out up track and down, not plants
As on a farm, but planets, evening stars
That varied in their hue from red to green.

"Paul's Wife" is a fresh proof of the fallacious habit of labeling. For here is a fresh variety of color that is, in its restrained gamut, nothing short of brilliant. The poem begins, as many of Frost's do, in a tone of badinage, a fantastic examination of an idea. Five half-humorous, half-satisfactory reasons are given why Paul always leaves the lumber-camps whenever his wife is mentioned. And then the real, burning reason emerges. Possibly there is something a little "grim" in the manner of narration of this romantic story of Paul and—her name is not given, but, because of her starry innocence, I prefer to think it is Virginia—due to the incongruity of such an idyl being told by a coarse lumberman like Murphy. Possibly, also, there is a "grim" commentary on the way in which the world usually receives magic in the passage where Murphy and his pals see the two young lovers honeymooning on the cliff and, with an instinctive unanimity, they

put their throats together,
And let out a loud yell, and threw a bottle,
As a brute tribute of respect to beauty.

But I prefer to leave the symbolism to others. "Paul's Wife" is, first of all, a New England fairy-story—a fairy-story, I hasten to add, told in the tones of natural speech that have made Frost's idioms so individual. The shifting fancies accompany the story, so that the reader has, according to a romantic or realistic bent, his choice of interpretations. Did Paul actually create a woman out of white pine pith? Or, when Paul lost it in the pond, was there merely a girl swimming he had not happened to see? But there

can be no two ways of thinking about the end of the poem and the sudden flash of emotion, the flame of passion that illuminates it. Only the limitations of space prevent me from discussing the exquisite tenderness of "Two Look At Two," the philosophical banter of "A Star in a Stone-Boat," that quaint set of tercets, the fantastic movement of "Our Singing Strength." I must leave the details as I approach the coda.

There is one phase of Frost's work which, having failed to stress, I would like to end on—his colorful epigrammatic gift. All of the volumes will yield their tufts of individual brilliance if one is hunting for purple patches. But they are not mere isolated jewels, lovely incongruities in tawdry settings. They have their own life, growing from the situation even more than from the poet's consciousness. This from "The Oven Bird," to those who do not find this poetry sufficiently lyric, may have the tone of either indulgent or apologetic self-appraisal:

> The bird would cease and be as other birds
> But that he knows in singing not to sing.
> The question that he frames in all but words
> Is what to make of a diminished thing.

And this concluding line from that deprecating tribute, "Hyla Brook," is no less native:

> We love the things we love for what they are.

But though Frost is master of the minor cadence, his blank verse achieves a rapture of its own. One of its loveliest risings into ecstasy is the passage in "The Death of the Hired Man" which begins:

> Part of a moon was falling down the west,
> Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
> Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw
> And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand

Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard the tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.

The same poem contains other passages which are no less memorable and one which is even more striking. Here are a pair of sentences that, without leaving the level of casual conversation, somehow achieve the height of epigrammatic speech, condensing in three lines two remarkable, poetic definitions:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in."
"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

But it is in the shorter pieces of *New Hampshire,* the richest of Frost's volumes, that this condensation is most apparent. Many of the later lyrics, such as "A Brook in the City," "Blue-Butterfly Day," "Fragmentary Blue," "The Onset," "The Disused Graveyard," "The Runaway," "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," and "Fire and Ice" (several of which originally appeared in *American Poetry, 1922—A Miscellany*) are, beneath their pictorial power, glorified epigrams. I quote the last named, a particularly brilliant fragment, with its packed wisdom and intensity.

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," more local in setting, is scarcely less memorable. This glimpse of the *minutiæ* of everyday reveals Frost's unique power; it is an amazing effect he achieves with what, in the work of any other poet, would be scarcely as much as a subject. Here again, rendering a tiny picture, an inconsequential situation, in terms of song, Frost proves how much of music and feeling can be contained in his quiet (and, incidentally, skilfully manipulated) rhymes.

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

And here, in a related key to "Fire and Ice," is an epigrammatic quatrain which only a farmer could have written but whose irony can be appreciated not only by those whose ground often freezes several feet deep.

PLOWMEN

A plow, they say, to plow the snow.
They cannot mean to plant it, though—
Unless in bitterness to mock
At having cultivated rock.

It does not take much discernment to see that such poems, for all their intellectual play, are not the result of purely cerebral activity. They are not merely thoughtful poems, for poetry that has its inception in the intellect usually remains there. The living poem is something that is felt first and thought out afterwards. "It begins," Frost has said somewhere, "with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfilment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words." In this sentence lies the explanation of Frost's remarkable persuasiveness. He has given emotion, thought and words such flavor and freshness that no poet since Whitman has been more native and, in his very localism, more universal.

# EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

When the *Collected Poems* of Edwin Arlington Robinson (The Macmillan Company, 1921) appeared and, immediately after, received the Pulitzer Prize, this poet achieved his first "popular" success. Yet some of the most distinguished passages in this volume of almost six hundred closely printed pages were written thirty years before its publication. Like Frost, Robinson had to wait many years before a public discovered his peculiar composite of Attic wisdom and New England wit. Born in Maine in 1869, Robinson reflected the Yankee economy of speech, even in his earliest work—to which no one, apparently, cared to listen. Even after he had published several books, his name was known only to a few of the *literati* until Theodore Roosevelt (the first Mæcenas of American Presidents!) acclaimed and aided him.

At first glance, Robinson seems one of the least American of our poets. He uses, with surprisingly few variations, the traditional English forms; there are lines when he seems to be speaking with the accents of Robert Browning in the rhythms of W. S. Gilbert. But, beneath a superficial indebtedness, no living writer has achieved a more personal idiom or a more melodious speech—or a more indigenous one. His ironic studies of character are as incisive as (and far more sympathetic than) those of Masters'; his New England backgrounds are as faithful as those of Frost's. Lacking a fundamental buoyancy, Robinson has other qualities which may be less national but are no less local. His shrewd appraisals, his constant questioning instead of placid accept-

ance, his reticence that screens a vigorous analysis—these qualities reveal the spirit of the early Puritan operating with the technic of the modern psychologist.

When most of the preceding generation were poeticizing in ornate and artificial numbers, Robinson was the first to express himself in that hard and clear utterance which became part of our present manner and, later on, was adopted as one of the chief articles in the creed of the Imagists. Unperturbed by the battles over new forms and metrical innovations, he has gone on, like every first-rate artist, making old forms distinctive and definitely his own. His rhymes are brought in with a masterly ease, showing what rhyme, at its best, should be: a natural, musical punctuation. They flow, like his lines, as smoothly and pointedly as a sharp conversation.

His precise and almost astringent tone is in itself a curious study. Robinson's idiom, though a simple one to read, is not always an easy one to understand. It is a simplicity that is sometimes deceptive and often circumlocutory. He speaks of a hypodermic needle as "a slight kind of engine"; billiard balls are referred to, in a sort of indirect irony, as "three spheres of insidious ivory"; instead of saying that a man drank too moderately, he remarks:

> But his indifferent wassailing was always
> Too far within the measure of excess.

It is not because Robinson is fond of words that he indulges in such roundabout rhetoric; it is the occasional mistake of an essentially direct mind in an effort to avoid baldness. Usually Robinson is not only economic but actually close-fisted with his clipped phrases; sometimes in his desire to get rid of excess verbiage, he throws away everything but the meaning—and keeps that to himself. He is often like a sculptor who takes an old statue, and, in order to give it

fresh vitality, cuts away the insipid ornaments and floral excrescences that spoil a simple outline. But having removed the irritating fripperies, Robinson goes further. In an effort to get below the superficials, he occasionally cuts so far below the surface that he actually sacrifices the stark outline that he was most anxious to keep.

Let me drop the confining metaphor and turn to Robinson's first volume. In *Children of the Night* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897) there are a few poems that illustrate how Robinson in an effort for the brightest clarity ends in a dazzling obscurity. Observe "Fleming Helphenstine" and several of the untitled sonnets. Or regard, for still better illustrations, such poems in the succeeding volume as "Calverly's," "Leffingwell" and "Atherton's Gambit," and observe how everything is straight and simple except Robinson's thought. The words themselves are direct, the individual phrases are skilful and precise, the language is full of a rich intellectuality—but there has been so much pruning and paring that the story element often escapes. But it is not lost; it can be captured and held. Another reading usually brings it nearer, and a sympathetic effort to reach the matter through Robinson's manner will reward the reader with surprising flashes of a beauty that is none the less persuasive for being devious.

If from these sentences I give the impression that Robinson is difficult reading, I have written more clumsily than usual. It is, in fact, rare that he is quite so cryptic; rarer still that his poems withdraw into cloudiness. In the main, they are full of sunlight, sunlight so strong that we have to look two or three times before we can see all the details it plays upon. In the first volume we find at least half a dozen examples of such brilliance. The title-poem is a triumphant vindication of the spirit that questions, of the courageous self rising above darkness and doubt. Robinson

has so often been charged with cynicism that such verses are needed as rebuttal. There is a sadness in his sagacity, but always he declares:

> It is the faith within the fear
> That holds us to the life we curse.

This is the ending of "The Children of the Night":

> There is one creed, and only one,
> That glorifies God's excellence;
> So cherish, that His will be done,
> The common creed of common sense.
>
> It is the crimson, not the gray,
> That charms the twilight of all time;
> It is the promise of the day
> That makes the starry sky sublime;
>
> It is the faith within the fear
> That holds us to the life we curse;—
> So let us in ourselves revere
> The Self which is the Universe!
>
> Let us, the Children of the Night,
> Put off the cloak that hides the scar!
> Let us be Children of the Light,
> And tell the ages what we are!

The most important things in this volume are Robinson's astringent character delineations which, with much greater artistry, suggest the portraits in Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* which they antedated by twenty years. But the most interesting technical feature is the way in which he has triumphed over his medium, particularly in the use of the old French forms and their English counterparts. He takes both ballad and ballade and, infusing a fresh energy of language, makes them as modern as his most intraverted

studies. See, for instance, how he uses a form as light as the idyllic little *villanelle* and achieves a poem as somber and intense as:

THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around that sunken sill?
They are all gone away.

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away;
There is nothing more to say.

But it is in the etchings of personalities that Robinson is at his height. Few things could be more revealing in their very inconsequential tone than the swift glances of "James Wetherell," "Cliff Klingenhagen," "Aaron Stark," "Luke Havergal," "Reuben Bright." All of these are drawn with a sure and energizing touch. And none of the people in *Spoon River* (to which many of these characters bear a sort of avuncular relation) is pictured more surely and unforgettably than:

RICHARD CORY

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich,—yes, richer than a king,—
And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

I would like to quote some of the less personal but equally powerful sonnets, particularly "Supremacy" and "The Clerks." But I must proceed to the following volume. *Captain Craig* was issued in 1902 by Houghton Mifflin Company, and in 1915 The Macmillan Company brought out a revised edition with several additional poems. It is from the Macmillan publication that I quote, for one of the added poems it contains is one of Robinson's finest efforts. It is "The Field of Glory," a piece where Robinson's irony is inextricably mingled with his tenderness.

War shook the land where Levi dwelt,
And fired the dismal wrath he felt,
That such a doom was ever wrought
As his, to toil while others fought;
To toil, to dream—and still to dream,
With one day barren as another;

To consummate, as it would seem,
The dry despair of his old mother.

Far off one afternoon began
The sound of man destroying man;
And Levi, sick with nameless rage,
Condemned again his heritage,
And sighed for scars that might have come,
And would, if once he could have sundered
Those harsh, inhering claims of home
That held him while he cursed and wondered.

Another day, and then there came,
Rough, bloody, ribald, hungry, lame,
But yet themselves, to Levi's door,
Two remnants of the day before.
They laughed at him and what he sought;
They jeered him, and his painful acre;
But Levi knew that they had fought,
And left their manners to their Maker.

That night, for the grim widow's ears,
With hopes that hid themselves in fears,
He told of arms, and featly deeds,
Whereat one leaps the while he reads,
And said he'd be no more a clown,
While others drew the breath of battle.—
The mother looked him up and down,
And laughed—a scant laugh with a rattle.

She told him what she found to tell,
And Levi listened, and heard well
Some admonitions of a voice
That left him no cause to rejoice.
He sought a friend, and found the stars,
And prayed aloud that they should aid him;
But they said not a word of wars,
Or of a reason why God made him.

And who's of this or that estate
We do not wholly calculate,

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

From a recent photograph

When baffling shades that shift and cling
Are not without their glimmering;
When even Levi, tired of faith,
Beloved of none, forgot by many,
Dismissed as an inferior wraith,
Reborn may be as great as any.

One of the outstanding features of Robinson's work is his affection for these "inferior wraiths." In an age which exalts the successful man, Robinson lauds or at least lifts the failure. The *Collected Poems* are crowded with his tentative tributes to those "beloved of none, forgot by many"; his heart goes out to the proud-blind mother of the mediocrity in "The Gift of God"; his sympathy stops us from laughing out loud at the bewildered "Miniver Cheevy," lost in the modern world; he makes us share the ironic pathos of "Bewick Finzer." If Robinson had written nothing but these intimate portrayals, his title to first rank in our literature would still be secure.

As for the long title-poem, "Captain Craig" is an eighty-four page account of the decline of a picturesque old vagabond, his four young friends and the interminable letters he writes them. For all its technical sprightliness and dialectic repartee, there is something a bit owlish in its unblinking seriousness (it, also, is an example of Robinson's glorification of failure), even in its irony. Captain Craig himself seems less a character-study than a peg on which to hang a great quantity of brilliant, sometimes beautiful but finally tiresome talk.

The succeeding poem is a far more eloquent affair. In "Isaac and Archibald" we have not only one of the poet's kindest analyses but one of Robinson's few glimpses of his boyhood. The drawing of the two old men, each separately confiding in the lad their fears for each other and, unconsciously, for themselves, is one of the most touching (as it

is one of the most native) pictures in the gallery of American art. This is the dignified ending, as the two companions sit down to a game of seven-up and the boy keeps count:

So I remember, even to this day,
Just how they sounded, how they placed themselves,
And how the game went on while I made marks
And crossed them out, and meanwhile made some
Trojans.
Likewise I made Ulysses, after Isaac,
And a little after Flaxman. Archibald
Was wounded when he found himself left out,
But he had no heroics, and I said so:
I told him that his white beard was too long
And too straight down to be like things in Homer.
"Quite so," said Isaac.—"Low," said Archibald;
And he threw down a deuce with a deep grin
That showed his yellow teeth and made me happy.
So they played on till a bell rang from the door,
And Archibald said, "Supper."—After that
The old men smoked while I sat watching them
And wondered with all comfort what might come
To me, and what might never come to me;
And when the time came for the long walk home
With Isaac in the twilight, I could see
The forest and the sunset and the sky-line,
No matter where it was that I was looking:
The flame beyond the boundary, the music,
The foam and the white ships, and two old men
Were things that would not leave me.—And that
night
There came to me a dream—a shining one,
With two old angels in it. They had wings,
And they were sitting where a silver light
Suffused them, face to face. The wings of one
Began to palpitate as I approached,
But I was yet unseen when a dry voice
Cried thinly, with unpatronizing triumph,
"I've got you, Isaac; high, low, jack, and the game."

Isaac and Archibald have gone their way
To the silence of the loved and well-forgotten.
I knew them, and I may have laughed at them;
But there's a laughing that has honor in it,
And I have no regret for light words now.
Rather I think sometimes they may have made
Their sport of me;—but they would not do that,
They were too old for that. They were old men,
And I may laugh at them because I knew them.

The next volume, *The Town down the River* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), shows an ever surer and and more versatile turn of speech than the previous volumes. This is Robinson's second-best and probably his most generally admired book. It begins splendidly with a poem to Lincoln in his terse, epigrammatic style, a style that seems at first to be almost too dry and close-packed, but which mellows gradually into something quite different than its hard contours. Of all the tributes to the great emancipator, this is one of the few that maintain a genuine nobility and practically the only one that does not try to show the man's intimate humanity by some reference to rail-splitting and the use of "Honest Abe." Without descending from his austere level, Robinson actually comes nearer Lincoln than any of his compatriots. These are the last three verses of "The Master":

For he, to whom we had applied
Our shopman's test of age and worth,
Was elemental when he died,
As he was ancient at his birth:
The saddest among kings of earth,
Bowed with a galling crown, this man
Met rancor with a cryptic mirth,
Laconic—and Olympian.

The love, the grandeur, and the fame
Are bounded by the world alone;
The calm, the smouldering, and the flame

Of awful patience were his own:
With him they are forever flown
Past all our fond self-shadowings,
Wherewith we cumber the Unknown
As with inept, Icarian wings.

For we were not as other men:
'Twas ours to soar and his to see.
But we are coming down again,
And we shall come down pleasantly;
Nor shall we longer disagree
On what it is to be sublime.
But flourish in our perigee
And have one Titan at a time.

One passes the poem to Roosevelt, entitled "The Revealer," with as much charity as possible. One passes it more quickly because of such chiseled sonnets as "Shadrach O'Leary," "Alma Mater," "The Sunken Crown" and this brief revelation of a dying man and his physician, told by the latter:

HOW ANNANDALE WENT OUT

"They called it Annandale—and I was there
To flourish, to find words, and to attend:
Liar, physician, hypocrite, and friend,
I watched him; and the sight was not so fair
As one or two that I have seen elsewhere:
An apparatus not for me to mend—
A wreck, with hell between him and the end,
Remained of Annandale; and I was there.

"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;
So put the two together, if you can,
Remembering the worst you know of me.
Now view yourself as I was, on the spot—
With a slight kind of engine. Do you see?
Like this . . . You wouldn't hang me? I
thought not."

The long monologue of Napoleon on Saint Helena is frankly disappointing; it is neither tragic nor vivid, merely petulant. And, what is worse, it is almost dull—one of Robinson's few uninteresting passages. A few pages further on we come, with an abrupt contrast, to one of Robinson's liveliest moments. Just as, in the sonnets, he condensed dramatic portraiture in a way to make the classical form seem surprisingly new, so his flawless quatrains—without departing from the pattern to the extent of an added grace note—are indubitably his own. In the whimsical appraisal of "Miniver Cheevy," Robinson achieves a fresh triumph; in these lines describing the shiftless romanticist the poet has permanently etched a character with strokes that are lightly drawn but go deep as life.

MINIVER CHEEVY

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
He wept that he was ever born,
And he had reasons.

Miniver loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were
prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him dancing.

Miniver sighed for what was not,
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
And Priam's neighbors.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown
That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,
And Art, a vagrant.

Miniver loved the Medici,
Albeit he had never seen one;
He would have sinned incessantly
Could he have been one.

Miniver cursed the commonplace
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
He missed the mediaeval grace
Of iron clothing.

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
But sore annoyed was he without it;
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
And thought about it.

Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
Scratched his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.

All three of these volumes, excellent in themselves, seem little more than a succession of preludes for the dynamic volume which was to establish Robinson in the respect of a larger public. Meanwhile, he published two plays (*The Porcupine* and *Van Zorn*), the first in 1914, the second in 1915. Both of them show clearly that Robinson is far more dramatic as a writer of ballads than as a dramatist.

The following year Robinson published his fullest and most representative work; a fusing of all his gifts. In *The Man Against the Sky* (The Macmillan Company, 1916) we not only have all of Robinson in one hundred and fifty pages; we have him unfalteringly at his best. I have already said that the preceding volumes were, for all their penetrative vigor, only preparations for this intellectually robust and far more varied work. Here the human sympathy is deepened; the epigrammatic turns are sharper; there is even a more definitely lyric note in such poems as the eloquent

"Flammonde," the highly dramatic scene ironically entitled "The Clinging Vine," the delicately satiric "Bokardo" and this still more gentle piece of disillusion and sympathy from which, for the sake of space, I have committed the vandalism of omitting one stanza:

### THE GIFT OF GOD

Blessed with a joy that only she
Of all alive shall ever know,
She wears a proud humility
For what it was that willed it so,—
That her degree should be so great
Among the favored of the Lord
That she may scarcely bear the weight
Of her bewildering reward.

As one apart, immune, alone,
Or featured for the shining ones
And like to none that she has known
Of other women's other sons,—
The firm fruition of her need,
He shines anointed; and he blurs
Her vision, till it seems indeed
A sacrilege to call him hers.

Perchance a canvass of the town
Would find him far from flags and shouts,
And leave him only the renown
Of many smiles and many doubts;
Perchance the crude and common tongue
Would havoc strangely with his worth;
But she, with innocence unwrung,
Would read his name around the earth.

And others, knowing how this youth
Would shine, if love could make him great,
When caught and tortured for the truth

Would only writhe and hesitate;
While she, arranging for his days
What centuries could not fulfil,
Transmutes him with her faith and praise,
And has him shining where she will.

She crowns him with her gratefulness,
And says again that life is good;
And should the gift of God be less
In him than in her motherhood,
His fame, though vague, will not be small,
As upward through her dream he fares,
Half clouded with a crimson fall
Of roses thrown on marble stairs.

In this volume we notice with greater emphasis how strict and simple are the forms Robinson uses and how much he is at home in them. Even the rhyme-schemes are free of the slightest twist or innovation. He takes patterns that are anything but unusual and, without an effort to change the shape, makes them somehow as original as if they had been devised by him. In fact, some of the most intense and serious lines he has written are cast in the identical light-verse stanzas of Austin Dobson, C. S. Calverley and Locker-Lampson. These poems are, in themselves, a complete refutation of the still persisting theory that nothing psychological, nothing probing or intimately sensitive—in short, that nothing "new"—can be expressed in the old forms (*vide* Mr. Edward Storer), that rhyme and a regular rhythm will, in a few years, be practically obsolete. Such brilliant and analytic verse as Robinson's completely explodes the fallacy that (I quote Mr. Storer's conclusion) "a poet who wishes to give expression to realities in modern life . . . will find that he is confined for his literary expression to the two media of prose and free verse." Page after page in this collection refutes this exceedingly impressionistic dictum.

Observe the intricate mental processes revealed in one octosyllabic eight-line stanza (a favorite medium of Robinson's) as regular as this from "Flammonde":

How much it was of him we met
We cannot ever know; nor yet
Shall all he gave us quite atone
For what was his, and his alone;
Nor need we now, since he knew best,
Nourish an ethical unrest:
Rarely at once will nature give
The power to be Flammonde and live.

Or note how the "realities in modern life" are made still more pointed in evenly-rhymed poems like "Old King Cole," with its mellow nonchalance, the obviously scientific diagnosis in "Eros Turannos" with its unexpected picturesque climax, the Freudian analysis of repressed desire in "Llewellyn and the Tree." And what could be more surprising than the way Robinson achieves modernity of thought through a medium as old as the ballad form? Here is, surely, one of the most remarkably turned dialogue-ballads of this generation:

JOHN GORHAM

"Tell me what you're doing over here, John Gorham,
Sighing hard and seeming to be sorry when you're not;
Make me laugh or let me go now, for long faces in the moonlight
Are a sign for me to say again a word that you forgot."—

"I'm over here to tell you what the moon already
May have said or maybe shouted ever since a year ago;
I'm over here to tell you what you are, Jane Wayland,
And to make you rather sorry, I should say, for being so."—

"Tell me what you're saying to me now, John Gorham,
Or you'll never see as much of me as ribbons any more;
I'll vanish in as many ways as I have toes and fingers,
And you'll not follow far for one where flocks have been
before."—

"I'm sorry now you never saw the flocks, Jane Wayland,
But you're the one to make of them as many as you need.
And then about the vanishing. It's I who mean to vanish;
And when I'm here no longer you'll be done with me
indeed."—

"That's a way to tell me what I am, John Gorham!
How am I to know myself until I make you smile?
Try to look as if the moon were making faces at you,
And a little more as if you meant to stay a little while."—

"You are what it is that over rose-blown gardens
Makes a pretty flutter for a season in the sun;
You are what it is that with a mouse, Jane Wayland,
Catches him and let's him go and eats him up for fun."—

"Sure I never took you for a mouse, John Gorham;
All you say is easy, but so far from being true,
That I wish you wouldn't ever be again the one to think so;
For it isn't cats and butterflies that I would be to you."—

"All your little animals are in one picture—
One I've had before me since a year ago to-night;
And the picture where they live will be of you, Jane
Wayland
Till you find a way to kill them or to keep them out of sight."—

"Won't you ever see me as I am, John Gorham,
Leaving out the foolishness and all I never meant?
Somewhere in me there's a woman, if you know the way to
find her.
Will you like me any better if I prove it and repent?"

"I doubt if I shall ever have the time, Jane Wayland;
And I dare say all this moonlight lying round us might as well
Fall for nothing on the shards of broken urns that are
forgotten,
As on two that have no longer much of anything to tell."

The last stanza of this poem, which can stand among the author's best, illustrates the growth of his power of summary. It is particularly effective when, at the end of an unusually involved poem, Robinson suddenly caps the whole thing with a simile that is so brilliant in epithet as to be startlingly epigrammatic. In the sonnet to George Crabbe (in *Children of the Night*) we have this memorable sestet:

Whether or not we read him, we can feel
From time to time the vigor of his name
Against us like a finger for the shame
And emptiness of what our souls reveal
In books that are as altars where we kneel
To consecrate the flicker, not the flame.

From an unnamed octave in the same volume we have two lines that leap out of their limitations:

Wisdom shafts the darkness here and there.
Like scattered lamps in unfrequented streets.

"Hillcrest," in *The Man Against the Sky,* has this rarely exquisite cadence:

Far journeys and hard wandering
Await him in whose crude surmise
Peace, like a mask, hides everything
That is and has been from his eyes;

And all his wisdom is unfound,
Or like a web that error weaves
On airy looms that have a sound
No louder now than falling leaves.

And this is the beautiful figure which concludes "Eros Turannos":

> Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
> That with a god have striven,
> Nor hearing much of what we say,
> Take what the god has given;
> Though like waves breaking it may be,
> Or like a changed familiar tree,
> Or like a stairway to the sea
> Where down the blind are driven.

There are two other poems in this volume that call for more extended notice than I can possibly give here. One is the title-poem that brings the book to a high and splendid *finale;* the other is "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford." Here, in spite of the four hundred lines of blank verse (or should one say because of them), Robinson's firm pencil does not waver; he has succeeded in drawing the clearest and most human portrait of Shakespeare that has been attempted by any one, not even excepting the full-length prose studies of Georg Brandes and Frank Harris. Even in the trivialities of conversation (where Jonson is sketched almost as unerringly as his friend and master) the interpretive power rises. Here is an illustrative fragment from Jonson's monologue:

> I'll meet him out alone of a bright Sunday,
> Trim, rather spruce, and quite the gentleman.
> "What ho, my lord!" say I. He doesn't hear me;
> Wherefore I have to pause and look at him.
> He's not enormous, but one looks at him.
> A little on the round if you insist,
> For now, God save the mark, he's growing old;
> He's five and forty, and to hear him talk
> These days you'd call him eighty; then you'd add
> More years to that. He's old enough to be

The father of a world, and so he is.
"Ben, you're a scholar, what's the time of day?"
Says he; and there shines out of him again
An aged light that has no age or station—
The mystery that's his—a mischievous
Half-mad serenity that laughs at fame
For being won so easy, and at friends
Who laugh at him for what he wants the most,
And for his dukedom down in Warwickshire—

And here is a more intense and characteristic passage which gives us, in the very accents of Shakespeare (a feat that no other living poet has accomplished) Robinson's own mental reverberations:

Not long ago, late in an afternoon,
I came on him unseen down Lambeth way,
And on my life I was afear'd of him:
He gloomed and mumbled like a soul from Tophet,
His hands behind him and his head bent solemn.
"What it is now," said I,—"another woman?"
That made him sorry for me, and he smiled.
"No, Ben," he mused; "it's Nothing. It's all Nothing.
We come, we go; and when we're done, we're done."
Spiders and flies—we're mostly one or t'other—
We come, we go; and when we're done, we're done."
"By God, you sing that song as if you knew it!"
Said I, by way of cheering him; "what ails ye?"
"I think I must have come down here to think,"
Says he to that, and pulls his little beard;
"Your fly will serve as well as anybody.
And what's his hour? He flies, and flies, and flies,
And in his fly's mind has a brave appearance;
And then your spider gets him in her net,
And eats him out, and hangs him up to dry.
That's Nature, the kind mother of all.
And then your slattern housemaid swings her broom,
And where's your spider? And that's Nature, also.
It's Nature, and it's Nothing. It's all Nothing.
It is a world where bugs and emperors

Go singularly back to the same dust,
Each in his time; and the old, ordered stars
That sang together, Ben, will sing the same
Old stave to-morrow."
When he talks like that,
There's nothing for a human man to do
But lead him to some grateful nook like this
Where we be now, and there to make him drink.
He'll drink, for love of me, and then be sick;
A sad sign always in a man of parts,
And always very ominous . . . The great
Should be as large in liquor as in love,—
And our great friend is not so large in either.

What we have here is nothing so romantically fictitious as the literary hero in terms of the demigod; we have the record of what might well have been a mixture of the immortal genius and a very mortal hankerer after peace, position and small-town prestige. This is the significant end of it:

Tell me, now,
If ever there was anything let loose
On earth by gods or devils heretofore
Like this mad, careful, proud, indifferent
Shakespeare!
Where was it, if it ever was? By heaven,
'Twas never yet in Rhodes or Pergamon—
In Thebes or Nineveh, a thing like this!
No thing like this was ever out of England;
And that he knows. I wonder if he cares.
Perhaps he does . . . O Lord, that House
in Stratford!

*Merlin* (The Macmillan Company, 1917) and *Lancelot* (Thomas Seltzer, 1920) are adaptations or rather revaluations of the Arthurian legend, two long poems which, upon first reading, suffer by comparison with the original as well

as with similar variations on historic themes by Lascelles Abercrombie. But, on closer examination, both (and especially the former) burn with intellectual heat. Robinson has surrounded the old romance with gorgeous color and a flashing vocabulary; his shrewd philosophy plays through it and transforms the tale into a complexity of spiritual cross-purposes. In both, Robinson has pictured the downfall of an order, a world in ashes, a disintegration through the very qualities which, at another time or from other standards, might have been rescuing heroisms. *Merlin,* the more vivid of the two, depicts the ruin of Arthur's kingdom when it is forsaken by its wise leader; *Lancelot* presents the final crash, the toppling of old orders and ideals. Definitely symbolic, the two poems have various implications. Whether the leading theme is the crumbling of beauty and idealism, a civilization destroyed by the intrigues that brought about the European war, or whether it is a parable of the conflict between "Woman and the light that Galahad found," the struggle between the forces that impel desire and action is eloquently projected. As units, the poems suffer from a lack of variety, a lack that seriously limits their very vitality. The characters all speak the same thoughtful speech, even the lesser figures intone it in the same slow idiom, and the heavy air of allegory makes many of the passages distant and indistinct. In the midst of lengthy recitatives, however, there are individual bits of great beauty, such as the scene where Merlin goes to Broceliande, his meeting with Vivian, and the half-lyrical, half-whimsical conversation when they first talk together.

> "Are you always all in green, as you are now?"
> Said Merlin, more employed with her complexion,
> Where blood and olive made wild harmony
> With eyes and wayward hair that were too dark
> For peace if they were not subordinated;

"If so you are, then so you make yourself
A danger in a world of many dangers.
If I were young, God knows if I were safe
Concerning you in green, like a slim cedar,
As you are now, to say my life was mine:
Were you to say to me that I should end it,
Longevity for me were jeopardized.
Have you your green on always and all over?"

"Come here, and I will tell you about that,"
Said Vivian, leading Merlin with a laugh
To an arbored seat where they made opposites:
"If you are Merlin—and I know you are—
For I remember you in Camelot,—
You know that I am Vivian, as I am;
And if I go in green, why, let me go so,
And say at once why you have come to me
Cloaked over like a monk, and with a beard
As long as Jeremiah's. I don't like it.
I'll never like a man with hair like that
While I can feed a carp with little frogs.
I'm rather sure to hate you if you keep it,
And when I hate a man I poison him."

"You've never fed a carp with little frogs."
Said Merlin; "I can see it in your eyes."—
"I might then, if I haven't," said the lady.

It is an absolutely individual and supple blank verse that Robinson has perfected, a blank verse that rises to magnificence in the climax of Guinevere's speech in *Lancelot* or sinks to a grave *adagio* at the end of *Merlin.*

Fiercer now,
The wind was like a flying animal
That beat the two of them incessantly
With icy wings, and bit them as they went.
The rock above them was an empty place
Where neither seer nor fool should view again
The stricken city. Colder blew the wind

Across the world, and on it heavier lay
The shadow and the burden of the night;
And there was darkness over Camelot.

*The Three Taverns* (The Macmillan Company, 1920) and *Avon's Harvest* (The Macmillan Company, 1921) followed rapidly—almost too rapidly. The latter poem which the author has called "a dime novel in verse," is a study of a fear-haunted, hate-driven man disguised as a mystery story which suffers toward the end from a cumulative cloudiness. *The Three Taverns,* though on a somewhat lower plane than *The Man Against the Sky,* has much of its spirit. The sonnets are firmer than ever, such monologues as "Nimmo," "John Brown," "Lazarus," impress the most careless reader with a high seriousness. And if the book contains such errors as "On the Way," which is unrelievedly tedious, and "London Bridge," in which Robinson has attempted the impossible task of setting a tragic theme to a lightly galloping meter, it also contains dramas as poignant as "The Mill" and a lyric which is the very epitome of Robinson's musical condensation.

THE DARK HILLS

Dark hills at evening in the west,
Where sunset hovers like a sound
Of golden horns that sang to rest
Old bones of warriors under ground,
Far now from all the bannered ways
Where flash the legions of the sun,
You fade—as if the last of days
Were fading, and all wars were done.

All of Robinson's books already mentioned may be found, with the addition of a dozen new poems and an improved revision of *Avon's Harvest,* in the comprehensive single volume, *Collected Poems,* which The Macmillan Company

published late in 1921. (A new volume, *Roman Bartholow*, appeared in 1923; a single poem of almost two hundred pages, a psychological, dramatic narrative in blank verse.) This splendid collection, in its arrangement as well as its scope, discloses, more sharply than any of the individual works, Robinson's importance—and his limitation. His language is unusually indirect, but it is not that which brings his poetry to a halt at the very peak of greatness. It is not that he is devious in the way he gives himself, but that, in the sense of complete abandon to an emotion, he never gives himself at all. The reader feels this lack of surrender, and it is this insufficiency which keeps Robinson from joining the small company of those whose lines not only smiled their ironies in cryptic meditation or sang their loveliness beneath the breath, but also leaped and raged and bled and suffered with their creator.

But though Robinson exercises too Puritan a restraint upon his characters as well as upon his passions, although much of his later work seems to have been written in the chill of autumnal moonlight, his performance occupies a leading place in American literature—a place not confined to this particular period. With his extraction of wisdom from knowledge, his hundred or more passages of profound but never pompous philosophy, his brilliantly turned phrases and mastery of a form beyond technique, he shares with Frost twin summits of our poetry—eminences to which no American poets, since Poe and Whitman, have ever attained.

# CARL SANDBURG

If Robinson and Frost may be termed intellectual aristocrats, Sandburg might well be classified as the emotional democrat. He is a feeler rather than a thinker; his work, seemingly without cerebration, springs directly, and frequently without shaping, from the agitations of the unconscious. In geographical as well as cultural backgrounds, the contrast is equally great. Carl Sandburg was born in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1878. Like Frost and Robinson he had to wait until he was almost forty before his work received recognition; unlike them, he earned his living by his hands, having been, in rapid succession, porter in a barber-shop, scene-shifter in a dingy music-hall, truck-handler in a brickyard, dishwasher in Omaha hotels, harvest-hand in Kansas, soldier in Porto Rico. These varied activities, strange preparation for a poet, gave him the contacts which helped him become the laureate of industrial America. There are, I hasten to add, two Sandburgs; the muscular, heavy-fisted, hard-hitting son of the streets, and his almost unrecognizable twin, the shadow-painter, the haunter of mists, the lover of implications and overtones. Neither one dominates his work; his poetry swings, with an equal force, from one extreme of pitch to the other. As his *fortissimo* notes usually drown the quieter melodies, it may be well to examine that phase of Sandburg which many have found boisterous and often brutal.

One can begin an analysis of Sandburg in no better way than by admitting this strain of brutality. But, one must qualify at once, he is brutal only when his material calls for brutal attack. He uses harsh colors and raw dissonances

when his theme is a vulgar dance-hall, or a Billy Sunday, or a battle-field; it would never occur to him to try to paint the howling energy of a steel-mill in delicate pastels. One thinks of Synge and his prophetic preface: "It may almost be said that before verse can be human again, it must learn to be brutal . . . it is the timber that wears most surely, and there is no timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms." The struggles, the concentrated angers, the social criticisms are all the firmer because they are born of a strength which derives its inspiration from the earth. They are all made of tough timber; they have "strong roots in the clay and worms."

It is this blend of beauty and brutality which is poetry's most human and enduring quality, that rich and almost vulgar vividness which is the life-blood of Chaucer and Shakespeare, of Burns and Rabelais, of Heine and Villon, and all those who were not only great artists but great humanists. This blend is Sandburg's outstanding characteristic. With a swift certainty, he goes to the very center of his theme. One could cite no better illustration than the first poem in his first book, *Chicago Poems* (Henry Holt and Company, 1916). (Technically speaking, Sandburg brought out a tiny pamphlet of twenty-two privately printed poems issued in 1904; but that was no more than a tentative appearance, uncertain and premature.) This poem, which commanded instant attention, brims with uplifted coarseness; here is an animal exultation that is none the less a spiritual exaltation.

CHICAGO

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's
Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness,

Bareheaded,
Shoveling,
Wrecking,
Planning,
Building, breaking, rebuilding;

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth.

Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young Man laughs,

Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,

Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the people,

Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.

Here is a picture of a city and a man. It is brilliant, bold and, for all its loud vigor, visionary. Throughout the book,

the poet is strangely like his city. There is the mixture o
a gigantic, youthful personality and an older, alien will t
mount. In "Fogs and Fires" and the more definitely social
istic poems, we see Sandburg's inheritance of Swedish mys
ticism fused with an American, I might almost say a prac
tical idealism.

There is an affiliated side of Sandburg's power that mos
of his critics have overlooked, and that is his ability to mak
language live; to make the words on the printed page sing
dance, bleed, rage, and suffer with the aroused reader. Th
creative use of proper names and slang, the interlarding o
cheapness and nobility which is Sandburg's highly persona
idiom, would have given great joy to Whitman. That old
barbarian was doubtless dreaming of possible followers
when he said that the *Leaves of Grass,* with its crude vigor,
was a sort of enlarged sketch-piece, "a passageway to some-
thing, rather than a thing in itself concluded," a language
experiment. In his unfinished sketch for a projected lec-
ture (*An American Primer*) he seemed to be praying for
future Sandburgs when he wrote:

"A perfect user of words uses things—they exude in
power and beauty from him—miracles from his hands,
miracles from his mouth—lilies, clouds, sunshine, women,
poured copiously—things, whirled like chain-shot rocks, de-
fiance, compulsion, houses, iron, locomotives, the oak, the
pine, the keen eye, the hairy breast, the Texan ranger, the
Boston truckman, the woman that arouses a man, the man
that arouses a woman.

"Words are magic . . . limber, lasting, fierce words
Do you suppose the liberties and the brawn of These States
have to do only with delicate lady-words? with gloved gen-
tleman-words?

"What is the fitness—what the strange charm of aborigi

nal names?—Monongahela—it rolls with venison richness upon the palate.

"American writers will show far more freedom in the use of names. Ten thousand common, idiomatic words are growing, or are to-day already grown, out of which vast numbers could be used by American writers, with meaning and effect—words that would be welcomed by the nation, being of the national blood."

While still on this consideration of words, raciness, and brutality in language, it may be suggestive to turn to what is, to many, the most offensive piece of writing in the volume. It is called "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter" and it begins:

> You come along . . . tearing your shirt . . . yelling about Jesus.
>
> Where do you get that stuff?
> What do you know about Jesus?
>
> Jesus had a way of talking soft and outside of a few bankers and higher-ups among the con men of Jerusalem everybody liked to have this Jesus around because he never made any fake passes and everything he said went and he helped the sick and gave the people hope.
>
> You come along squirting words at us, shaking your fist and calling us all damn fools so fierce the froth slobbers over your lips . . . always blabbing we're all going to hell straight off and you know all about it.
>
> I've read Jesus' words. I know what he said. You don't throw any scare into me. I've got your number. I know how much you know about Jesus.
>
> He never came near clean people or dirty people but they felt cleaner because he came along. It was your crowd of bankers and business men and lawyers hired the sluggers and murderers who put Jesus out of the running.

> I say the same bunch backing you nailed the nails into the hands of this Jesus of Nazareth. He had lined up against him the same crooks and strong-arm men now lined up with you paying your way.

Here we have an angry opponent of Billy Sunday answering that frothing evangelist in his own sweet mixture of slang, vilification and religious ecstasy. It is not only a tremendous protest at the falsification of Jesus but a passionate praise of the real martyr. And, incidentally, it is a startling experiment in the use of words. It seems almost a direct answer to Whitman's insistence that before the coming poets could become powerful, they would have to learn the use of powerful words; the greatest artists are, he affirmed, always simple and direct, never merely "polite or obscure." Whitman loved violence in language. "The appetite of the people of These States, in talk, in popular speeches and writings, is for unhemmed latitude, coarseness, directness, live epithets, expletives, words of opprobrium, resistance.—This I understand because I have the taste myself as largely as any one. I have pleasure in the use, on fit occasion, of 'traitor,' 'coward,' 'liar,' 'shyster,' 'skulk,' 'doughface,' 'trickster,' 'backslider,' 'thief,' 'impotent,' 'lickspittle.' "

There are, of course, times when, in the midst of rugged beauties, Sandburg exalts not beauty but mere ruggedness. He often becomes vociferous about "big stuff," "red guts," and the things which, on the printed page, are never strong but are only the stereotypes of strength. Sometimes he is so much in love with the physical quality of Strength itself that one hears his adjectives creak in a straining effort to achieve it. Such merely showy affairs as "Killers," "Fight," and a few others put one in mind of a professional strong

man in the glare of the footlights, of virility in front of a mirror, of an epithet exhibiting its muscle.

But, if any one imagines that Sandburg excels only in verse that is stentorian and heavy-fisted, let him turn to the page that immediately follows the title-poem. A greater contrast is inconceivable. This is the delicate and almost silent poem:

SKETCH

The shadows of the ships
Rock on the crest
In the low blue lustre
Of the tardy and the soft inrolling tide.

A long brown bar at the dip of the sky
Puts an arm of sand in the span of salt.

The lucid and endless wrinkles
Draw in, lapse and withdraw.
Wavelets crumble and white spent bubbles
Wash on the floor of the beach.

Rocking on the crest
In the low blue lustre
Are the shadows of the ships.

There are dozens of such miniatures in this volume alone. Apart from the musical quality of the extremely flexible lines—and there are times when the verse is pushed to and even beyond the borders of prose—the composition and draughtsmanship are amazing. One is continually arrested by the variety which Sandburg achieves in his restricted idiom, whether it is the concise etching of the Jew fish crier "terribly glad to be selling fish," or the broad strokes in the *genre* portrait of Mrs. Gabrielle Giovannitti in "Onion Days," or the half-transparent monotone of "Fog."

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then, moves on.

It is such tiny condensations of mood and motion that distinguish Sandburg's fragments. And yet the passion against injustice, against the everyday, routine tragedies that stamp out beauty, cries equally through the more delicately drawn pieces. Few contemporary lyricists have ever achieved more sheer poignance than "Graceland," "Anna Imroth," "Mill-Doors," "Masses." This still more wearied and pathetic poem sets the key:

HALSTED STREET CAR

Come, you cartoonists,
Hang on a strap with me here
At seven o'clock in the morning
On a Halsted street car.

Take your pencils
And draw these faces.

Try with your pencils for these crooked faces,
That pig-sticker in one corner—his mouth.
That overall factory girl—her loose cheeks.

Find for your pencils
A way to mark your memory
Of tired empty faces.

After their night's sleep,
In the moist dawn
And cool daybreak,
Faces
Tired of wishes,
Empty of dreams.

Here again, as in "They Will Say," "Fish Crier," and a dozen others, one sees how Sandburg evokes background and actors, a story or sorrow, with the fewest possible strokes and with contagious sympathy. His hate, a strengthening and challenging force, would distort and overbalance the effect of his work, were it not exceeded by the fiercer virility of his love. No writer in America is so hard and so soft-speaking; beneath the toughness he is possibly the tenderest of living poets. Read, as an instance, the poem on page 89:

MURMURINGS IN A FIELD HOSPITAL

[*They picked him up in the grass where he had lain two days in the rain with a piece of shrapnel in his lungs.*]

Come to me only with playthings now . . .
A picture of a singing woman with blue eyes
Standing at a fence of hollyhocks, poppies and sunflowers
Or an old man I remember sitting with children telling stories
Of days that never happened anywhere in the world . . .

No more iron cold and real to handle,
Shaped for a drive straight ahead.
Bring me only beautiful useless things.
Only old home things touched at sunset in the quiet . . .
And at the window one day in summer
Yellow of the new crock of butter
Stood against the red of new climbing roses . . .
And the world was all playthings.

It is this delicate touch, this exquisite poignancy that makes Sandburg's harsher commentaries doubly intense. His anger at conditions and his hate of cruelty proceed from a deep understanding of men's thwarted desires and dreams. This lavish and frankly sentimental pity shines out of all his work. It glows through poems like "Fellow Citizens,"

"Population Drifts," "The Harbor," and burns through the half-material, half-mystic "Choices," "Limited" (edged with irony) and the stern pathos of

A FENCE

Now the stone house on the lake front is finished and the workmen are beginning the fence.
The palings are made of iron bars with steel points that can stab the life out of any man who falls on them.
As a fence, it is a masterpiece, and will shut off the rabble and all vagabonds and hungry men and all wandering children looking for a place to play.
Passing through the bars and over the steel points will go nothing except Death and the Rain and Tomorrow.

In the next volume, *Cornhuskers* (Henry Holt and Company, 1918), there is the same animal and spiritual blend, the same uplifted vulgarity; but here it is far more co-ordinated and restrained. The gain in power is evident with the very first poem, a panoramic vision of the prairie that begins:

I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover, the eyes of its women, gave me a song and a slogan.

Here the water went down, the icebergs slid with gravel, the gaps and the valleys hissed, and the black loam came, and the yellow sandy loam.
Here between the sheds of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, here now a morning star fixes a fire sign over the timber claims and cow pastures, the corn belt, the cattle ranches.

Here the gray geese go five hundred miles and back with a wind under their wings, honking the cry for a new home.

Here I know I will hanker after nothing so much as one more sunrise or a sky moon of fire doubled to a river moon of water.

The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart!

. . .

After the sunburn of the day
handling a pitchfork at a hayrack,
after the eggs and biscuit and coffee,
the pearl-gray haystacks
in the gloaming
are cool prayers
to the harvest hands.

. . .

In the city among the walls the overland passenger train is choked and the pistons hiss and the wheels curse.
On the prairie the overland flits on phantom wheels and the sky and the soil between them muffle the pistons and cheer the wheels.

. . .

I am here when the cities are gone.
I am here before the cities come.
I nourished the lonely men on horses.
I will keep the laughing men who ride iron.
I am dust of men.

These are the sonorous, opening lines of the volume, a wider and more confident rhythm than Sandburg had previously attempted. The entire collection is similarly strengthened; there is a greater depth and dignity in the later poems. Observe the unusual, athletic beauty of "Manitoba Childe Roland," "Always the Mob," "The Four Brothers" and this muscular prayer for strength that can build as well as tear down:

PRAYERS OF STEEL

Lay me on an anvil, O God.
Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.

Let me pry loose old walls.
Let me lift and loosen old foundations.

Lay me on an anvil, O God.
Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike.
Drive me into the girders that hold a skyscraper
together.
Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into the
central girders.
Let me be the great nail holding a skyscraper
through blue nights into white stars.

In this volume Sandburg again shows how responsive he is to the limber and idiomatic phrases that are the blood and bones of our speech. His language lives almost as fervidly as the life from which it is taken. But here his intensity is seldom raucous. He has written little that is quieter and yet more positive than the calm irony in "Knucks," the pioneer-celebrating "Leather Leggings," the suggestive force in "Interior," the solemn simplicity of "Grass," the epigrammatic brevity of

SOUTHERN PACIFIC

Huntington sleeps in a house six feet long.
Huntington dreams of railroads he built and owned.
Huntington dreams of ten thousand men saying: Yes, sir.

Blithery sleeps in a house six feet long.
Blithery dreams of rails and ties he laid.
Blithery dreams of saying to Huntington: Yes, sir.

Huntington,
Blithery, sleep in houses six feet long.

Similarly notable are the modern rendering of the tablet writing of the fourth millennium B.C. in "Bilbea," the faithful picture of a small town in "Band Concert," the

truncated "Memoir of a Proud Boy," the strange requiem note in "Cool Tombs," one of the loveliest unrhymed cadences of our time:

> When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the tombs, he forgot the copperheads and the assassin . . . in the dust, in the cool tombs.
>
> And Ulysses Grant lost all thought of con men and Wall Street, cash and collateral turned ashes . . . in the dust, in the cool tombs.
>
> Pocahontas' body, lovely as a poplar, sweet as a red haw in November or a pawpaw in May, did she wonder? does she remember? . . . in the dust, in the cool tombs?
>
> Take any streetful of people buying clothes and groceries, cheering a hero or throwing confetti and blowing tin horns . . . tell me if the lovers are losers . . . tell me if any get more than the lovers . . . in the dust . . . in the cool tombs.

This fresh blend of proper names and slang, Sandburg's most characteristic idiom, is used with excellent effect in *Cornhuskers*. And it is this mingling that enriches his heritage of mingled blood. Beneath the slang one is aware of the mystic. The poet has learned to give his penetrative *patois* a cosmic significance; he gives us Swedenborg in terms of State Street. This peculiar mysticism looks out of "Caboose Thoughts," "Wilderness," "Localities," "Old Timers," "Potato Blossom Songs and Jigs." There is a more extended spirituality here than was contained in the earlier volume; a quality that is no less dynamic but far more sonant. There have been few poems that blend sweetness and sonority more skilfully than some of the lyrics in the sections "Haunts" and "Persons Half Known." Notice

the subtle flow of "Laughing Corn," the tympanic syllables in "Drumnotes," and the almost feminine grace of this poem from the latter division, a tribute to a singer who died just as she had begun to sing:

ADELAIDE CRAPSEY*

Among the bumble-bees in red-top hay, a freckled field of
brown-eyed Susans dripping yellow leaves in July,
I read your heart in a book.

And your mouth of blue pansy—I know somewhere I have
seen it rain-shattered.

And I have seen a woman with her head flung between her
naked knees, and her head held there listening to the
sea, the great naked sea shouldering a load of salt.

And the blue pansy mouth sang to the sea:
*Mother of God, I'm so little a thing,*
*Let me sing longer,*
*Only a little longer.*

And the sea shouldered its salt in long gray combers hauling
new shapes on the beach sand.

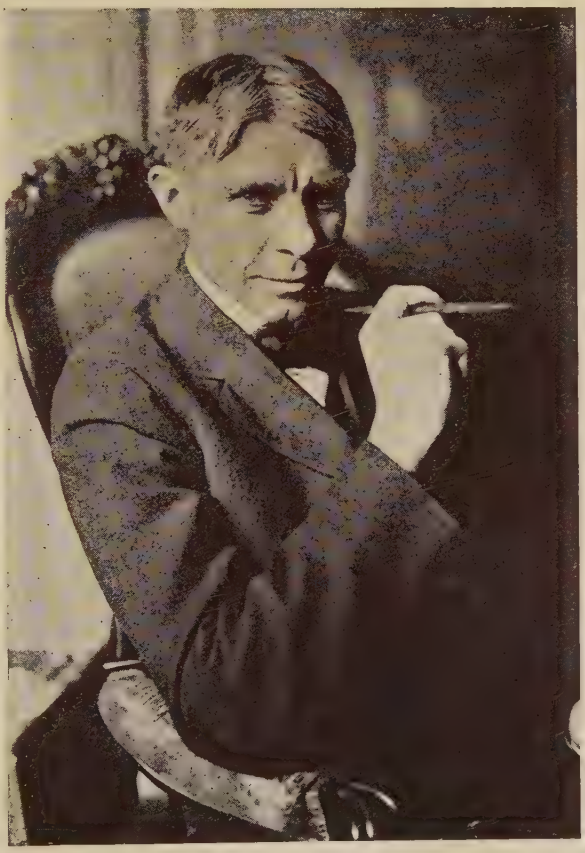
And here is an example of a mood that Sandburg mirrors so skilfully, a cloudy loveliness reflected in the hazy outlines of the free-rhythmed, unrhymed lyric:

SANDY ROADS

Let the crows go by hawking their caw and caw.
They have been swimming in midnights of coal mines somewhere.
Let 'em hawk their caw and caw.

Let the woodpecker drum and drum on a hickory stump.

* See page 328.



CARL SANDBURG

From a photograph
by Elizabeth Buehrmann

He has been swimming in red and blue pools somewhere
hundreds of years
And the blue has gone to his wings and the red has gone
to his head.
Let his red head drum and drum.

Let the dark pools hold the birds in a looking-glass.
And if the pool wishes, let it shiver to the blur of many
wings, old swimmers from old places.

Let the redwing streak a line of vermilion on the green
wood lines.
And the mist along the river fix its purple in lines of a
woman's shawl on lazy shoulders.

*Smoke and Steel* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920) divided the Poetry Society Prize with Stephen Vincent Benét's *Heavens and Earth* in 1921. *Smoke and Steel* establishes what *Chicago Poems* promised and *Cornhuskers* plainly intimated. It establishes, first of all, a peculiar kinship with the poet from whom Sandburg is furthest removed in temperament and technic, Robert Frost. Both poets are strikingly indigenous, both are in love with a world of frank and homely realities. But each wears his realism with a difference. Frost kneels at well-curbs and discovers universes; one farm, one rocky acre is too large for him to exhaust. Sandburg marches and countermarches over two hemispheres; one world is not large enough for his restless feet. Frost is true to *things;* the fact is always brimming over for him; he never hopes to drain it all. Sandburg also feeds on the fact; it nourishes, but it does not satisfy him. Frost plays with its twinkling or sardonic suggestions. For Sandburg, hot after finalities, implications are not enough; he insists on explanations; he probes eagerly for the question behind, the answer beyond. The past, "a wind gone

down," is a dead thing—"a bucket of ashes." But to-day, for all its tangibility, is no more solid or substantial to this peculiar realist; the present is a drifting mist through which he peers at an ocean of to-morrows. It is a revealing title Sandburg has chosen for himself. Steel hardens him, but it is the smoke of steel that carries his dreams.

The first poem in the new volume uncovers the heart of the contradiction. In this extended title poem it is at once evident that Sandburg is a reporter turned mystic. He uses the actual scene as a point of vivid and abrupt departure; for him realism acts chiefly as a spring-board. From it he leaps directly into a romantic, reckless mysticism. Fragments, torn from their setting, would do a double injustice to the unity of *Smoke and Steel.* For this is Sandburg's first completely successful long poem. His previous lengthy works were scarcely long poems at all, but a succession of brief figures, lyrical snatches—"Prairie" is a splendid example—loosely connected, almost disintegrated. Here mood, accent and image are held at a glowing pitch, fused in a new intensity. This tightening power and sharpness of effect extend through the major portion of the volume, making it the most important as it is the most varied of Sandburg's offerings. It is a new solidity that hits with a restrained power in the fourteen lines of "Pennsylvania," that backs the grim banter of "Losers" and emphasizes the less than half expressed pathos in

A. E. F.

There will be a rusty gun on the wall, sweetheart,
The rifle grooves curling with flakes of rust.
A spider will make a silver string nest in the darkest,
warmest corner of it.
The trigger and the range-finder, they too will be rusty,

And no hands will polish the gun, and it will hang on
the wall.
Forefingers and thumbs will point absently and casually
toward it.
It will be spoken about among half-forgotten, wished-
to-be-forgotten things.
They will tell the spider: Go on, you're doing good
work.

In the face of those who see only a coarse brutality and distorted veritism in Sandburg, it cannot be said too often that he is brutal only when dealing with brutal things, that behind the passionate force of his projectile phrases there burns the greater passion of his pity. It is difficult to believe that the harsh and hard-hitting person who seems to be writing with fists doubled, the poet of that magnificent protest, "The Liars" (significantly dated, March, 1919), is the same wistful visionary who can make such delicate designs as the "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind" or "Three Spring Notations on Bipeds" and who can sing so gently of sand-scribblings, women washing their hair, purple martins, a half-moon in a high wind. He is sensitive to every pitch and nuance—almost sentimental—even in his slang. The old cry rises out of the new jargon—"Crap-shooters," "Cahoots," "Jazz Fantasia," "Honkey Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio"—(the wells of English undefiled will be horribly disturbed by this downpour of American Esperanto!), these and a dozen others vibrate with the nostalgia of civilization beneath the noise of our industrial ferocity. "The Sins of Kalamazoo," in its direct opposition to Vachel Lindsay's village evangelism, exhibits the tawdry scene in its own flat colors and flatter accents. And here, from a totally different angle and in a far quieter key, is a commentary on its backgrounds:

CLEAN CURTAINS

New neighbors came to the corner house at Congress and Green streets.
The look of their clean white curtains was the same as the rim of a nun's bonnet.
One way was an oyster pail factory, one way they made candy, one way paper boxes, strawboard cartons.
The warehouse trucks shook the dust of the ways loose and the wheels whirled dust—there was dust of hoof and wagon wheel and rubber tire—dust of police and fire wagons—dust of the winds that circled at midnights and noon listening to no prayers.
"O mother, I know the heart of you," I sang passing the rim of a nun's bonnet—O white curtains—and people clean as the prayers of Jesus here in the faded ramshackle at Congress and Green.
Dust and the thundering trucks won—the barrages of the street, wheels and the lawless wind took their way—was it five weeks or six, little mother, the new neighbors battled, and then took away the white prayers in the windows?

This poetry, as Jean Catel declared in the *Mercure de France,* is charged with immediate associations; "it translates the new world." The fantastic hungers and strange energies of the instant dominate *Smoke and Steel,* from the sniggering irony of "The Lawyers Know Too Much," to the sudden pathos of "An Electric Sign Goes Dark," from the hot echoes of the Chicago race riots in "Hoodlums," to the sheer loveliness of the fifty poems in the lyrical section, "Mist Forms." Nor is Sandburg less sensitive to the shadows and shapes of twilight. He is a laureate of dusk, and in him, as in Whitman, Night finds her passionate celebrant. "Night Stuff," "Night Movement," "The Skyscraper Loves Night," "Night's Nothings Again" . . . in these "he clothes himself in his 'tablier de silence,' " grave,

but never impassive. Here is the first of the imaginative four in its brief entirety:

NIGHT STUFF

Listen a while, the moon is a lovely woman, a lonely woman, lost in a silver dress, lost in a circus rider's silver dress.
Listen a while, the lake by night is a lonely woman, a lovely woman, circled with birches and pines mixing their green and white among stars shattered in spray clear nights.
I know the moon and the lake have twisted the roots under my heart the same as a lonely woman, a lovely woman, in a silver dress, in a circus rider's silver dress.

And this is a haunting fragment from "Night's Nothings Again":

Who saw the night
let down its hair
and shake its bare shoulders
and blow out the candles of the moon. . .

Is the night woven of anything else
than the secret wishes of women,
the stretched empty arms of women?
the hair of women with stars and roses?

In *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922) there is again the lyric fire that distinguishes Sandburg. It fuses the sardonic invectives of "And So To-Day," the rhapsodic description of "The Windy City" (an amplification as well as a glorification of the early "Chicago") and the panoramic title poem. This is Sandburg's slenderest book, although the two long poems are among his most important exhibits. The shorter pieces are less integrated, most of them wander into gnomic whisper-

ings and vague abstractions. "Primer Lesson" is an exception. So are these few lines, which have the vigor of a jubilant shout:

UPSTREAM

The strong men keep coming on.
They go down shot, hanged, sick, broken.
They live on fighting, singing, lucky as plungers.
The strong mothers pulling them on . . .
The strong mothers pulling them
from a dark sea, a great prairie,
a long mountain.
Call hallelujah, call amen, call
deep thanks.
The strong men keep coming on.

Sandburg, for all his strength, is not without his weakness. Although he has gained greatly in control since *Chicago Poems,* he is still tempted to talk at the top of his voice, to bang the table, to whip off his shirt and point to the hair on his chest. These moments are growing less and less recurring; it is the opposite tendency that is growing more dangerous. It is one thing to be swayed by the proverbial poetic madness; determining to go poetically mad calls for fewer congratulations. In giving way to a program of mysticism, Sandburg gives the subconscious an absolutely free hand; he lets it dictate its unfettered—and, one might almost add, its unlettered—fantasies. There are times, more frequent than one might wish, when he completely fails to guide the current of his thought; it directs or misdirects him, so that he follows blindly what, too often, is merely a blind alley. Even in some of the later poems where the music predominates, he seems more the instrument played upon than the controlling artist. Too often he leaves his material soft and loose, instead of solidifying and shaping it to the proportions of a finished work. There are even

times when Sandburg is unsure about furnishing the clue to the half-realized vagaries of the imagination. But though the meaning is not always clear, there is no mistaking the emotion. It is implicit in every line; a concentrated exaltation, rich in its sweeping affirmations, rich in suggestive details.

Here, for all its moments of delicacy, are no delicate languors, no imitations of passion extracted from old songs, no substitutes for life gleaned in a library. This is something carved out of earth, showing dirt and yellow clay; here are great gaps and boulders, steaming ditches and the deep-chested laughter of workers quarreling, forgetting, building. Here are titanic visions: smoke-belching chimneys, quarries of iron-ribbed rock: the dreams of men and machinery. And silence is here—the silence of sleeping tenements, of creeping mist-forms, of sun-soaked cornfields. It is to Sandburg's immense credit that he has given not only our hungers but these silences a voice.

# VACHEL LINDSAY

THE work of Vachel Lindsay presents a study in contradictions. Born in 1879, in the shadow of the Governor's house in Springfield, Illinois, Lindsay has attempted the union of the Middle West and the Far East. He is a Puritan by intention and a pagan by intuition. His career shows him, as I think he desires to be, the minstrel turned missionary; a corn-fed Apollo singing to convert the apathetic, middle-class heathen. This *flair* for reformation exhibits itself in many ways. It includes, with charming incongruity, a rhymed explanation of why Lindsay voted the Socialist ticket, exhortative verses pleading for Prohibition, a Salvation Army tribute to General Booth Entering Heaven, and a jeremiad addressed bluntly "to the United States Senate." But his first and most enduring concern is doubtless embodied in the doctrine which he has called "The New Localism," and which is explained in his prose volume, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty,* a thesis amplified in his *The Golden Book of Springfield.* I doubt if there is any man in America who has labored longer and more earnestly than Lindsay to encourage the half-hearted dreams that hide and fear to declare themselves in our complacent villages and townships. His gay, intrepid spirit, his racy little prose pamphlets, his tramping journeys on which the sixteen-page *Rhymes to be Traded for Bread* (printed and distributed by himself) were given for a meal or a night's lodging—these, in themselves, compose a gospel of beauty more persuasive and potent than a hundred sermons.

This hope of beautifying the thousands of unbeautiful

villages, of instigating an artistic renaissance in the smallest of provincial communities, has expressed itself not only in Lindsay's poetry but in such roundabout efforts to apply a democratic, æsthetic system to a popular time-killer, as in his volume, *The Art of the Moving Picture,* and such direct if over-rhetorical evangelism as *The Golden Book of Springfield.* In an effort to make his dream come true, Lindsay has not hesitated to pursue it in person. When he started on his walking-trips in the South in 1906 and, later on, from Illinois through Kansas and into New Mexico, he took with him no money and practically no baggage. He carried mainly printed matter. He had with him reproductions of a series of his drawings, "The Village Improvement Parade," remarkably rhythmic and skilfully composed picture-cartoons, which he pinned on in- and out-door walls, explaining the mottoes on the banners and exhorting the farmers to study them at their leisure. These drawings are as characteristic as anything Lindsay has ever done—and as individual. Lindsay cheerfully acknowledges his debt to Robert Henri, his last and practically his only master, but the drawings themselves owe no more to this brilliant teacher than they do to the line of Beardsley or to the Egyptian hieroglyphs. All three of these influences may be discerned in Lindsay's pictures, but there is a wildness of conception, a whimsy of design, a buoyant curve that is nothing else but Lindsay.

The latest of his drawings, and the only ones now accessible to the public, are in the volume *Going-to-the-Sun* (D. Appleton and Company, 1923). Although his growing preoccupation with Egyptology is revealed in this series of fantasies, there is a spiritual as well as a linear kinship with the early series, "The Soul of the City Receives the Gift of the Holy Spirit," drawings which are so much more illuminating than the poems that I suspect the text was written only

to explain the pictures. This early rhymed tract is not one-tenth as effective as the ten wordless plates which act as illustrations or the strangely symbolic sequence, "The Village Improvement Parade," with its banners carrying such legends as: "Fair Streets are Better than Silver; Green Parks are Better than Gold." "Bad Taste is Mob-Law; Good Public Taste is Democracy." "Ugliness is a kind of Misgovernment." "A Bad Designer is, to That Extent, A Bad Citizen." "Without an Eager Public, All Teaching is Vain." . . . It is to be hoped that all these prints, together with some of Lindsay's lighter and less ritualistic sketches, will some day achieve the permanence of a bound volume; they will do much to round out a study of this unique combination of poet, panhandler, penman and pamphleteer.

In the pack that held the *Rhymes to be Traded for Bread,* Lindsay also carried a brief "Gospel of Beauty," which he distributed freely and which contained his own definition of his aims. This is what Lindsay meant by "The New Localism."

"The things most worth while are one's own hearth and neighborhood. The children now growing up should become devout gardeners or architects or park architects or teachers of dancing in the Greek spirit or musicians or novelists or poets or story-writers or craftsmen or wood-carvers or dramatists or actors or singers. They should find their talent and nurse it industriously. They should believe in every possible application to art-theory of the thoughts of the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. They should, if led by the spirit, wander over the whole nation in search of the secret of democratic beauty with their hearts at the same time filled to overflowing with the righteousness of God. Then they should come back to their own hearth and neighborhood and gather a little circle of their own sort of workers about them and strive to make

the neighborhood and home more beautiful and democratic and holy with their special art. . . ."

There is something curious, almost contradictory about a man leaving his home town to tell men they should return to their birthplaces. But this is precisely what Lindsay preached and did. One should know the earth, but one should not be a gypsy forever. The vagabond, he insisted, should taste the scattered largesse of the world. But he should return home. And having returned, he should plant the seeds he had gathered abroad. Toward the end of the volume *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* (The Macmillan Company) I find this illuminating paragraph, one of a set of proclamations that bring the chapters to a major cadence.

"Walking across this land I have found them,—little ganglions of life, promise of thousands of more. The next generation will be that of the eminent village. The son of the farmer will be no longer dazzled and destroyed by the fires of the metropolis. He will travel, but only for what he can bring back. Just as his father sends half-way across the continent for good corn or melon-seed, so he will make his village famous by transplanting and growing this idea or that. He will make it known for its pottery or its processessions, its philosophy or its peacocks, its music or its swans, its golden roofs or its great union cathedral of all faiths. There are a thousand miscellaneous achievements within the scope of the great-hearted village. Our agricultural land to-day holds the ploughboys who will bring these benefits. I have talked to these boys. I know them. I have seen their gleaming eyes."

With an appreciation of these backgrounds one approaches his first important volume of poetry, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven and Other Poems* (1913, Mitchell Kennerly), with sympathetic understanding. Here one imme-

diately encounters the curious blend of athletic exuberance, community pride and village evangelism. Consider the first poem, which gives the book its title. Here is the apotheosis of a great social-religious movement; but it is not so much a tribute to the Salvation Army as it is a glorification of a spirit greater and far beyond it. From a technical standpoint, Lindsay's attempt to blend noise, novelty and an old ecstasy is highly successful—and almost fortuitous. The experiment of setting lofty lines and reverential sentiment to cheap and brassy music is daring and splendid; especially since, in its very tawdriness, the music of the verse gives back the flavor of those earnest and blatant gatherings. It is, in a more definitely revivalistic spirit, the first of those characteristic chants which Lindsay lifted to so individual a plane. Here is the first section:

(*Bass drum beaten loudly.*)

Booth led boldly with his big bass drum—
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
The Saints smiled gravely and they said: "He's come."
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,
Lurching bravoes from the ditches dank,
Drabs from the alleyways and drug-fiends pale—
Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers frail.
Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,
Unwashed legions with the ways of Death—
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

And here is the fervid, rattling climax:

(*Grand chorus of all instruments. Tambourines to the foreground.*)

The hosts were sandaled, and the wings were fire!
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

But their noise played havoc with the angel-choir.
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
O, shout Salvation! It was good to see
Kings and princes by the Lamb set free.
The banjos rattled, and the tambourines
Jing-jing-jingled in the hands of Queens!

(*Reverently sung; no instruments.*)

And when Booth halted by the curb for prayer
He saw his Master through the flag-filled air.
Christ came gently with a robe and crown
For Booth the soldier, while the throng knelt down.
He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,
And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place.
*Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

It would be too much to expect the rest of the volume to live up to this amazing piece of work, and it does not. Lindsay the man is always a poet, but Lindsay the poet does not always write poetry. When he errs it is not, as one critic has pointed out, "on the side of the time-spirit"; when he fails it is not because he tries to express his age but because he expresses it badly. Frequently his verse rises from nothing more carefully constructed than a conviction, an anger, a crusade against the white-slave traffic or the corner saloon. Here his voice gets beyond his control; in his haste to deliver his message, he has no time to choose sharp and living words; he takes what comes first to hand—good, bad, indifferent—and hurries on, blurring the firm outline, losing the sense of leashed power without which no art-work can be ennobled. His aim is commendable but his volleys are erratic. In his anxiety to bang the bell, he sometimes shoots not only the target but the background to pieces. Such an effect is "The Trap," with its glib didacticism and its stock-worn phrases. Such a poem also is the polemic "To the United States Senate" and one or two more. But these

things are the poet in his dullest periods even though they be the propagandist in his most fiery moments. The excellent blend of both of them is achieved otherwhere, notably in the dignified and sonorous:

THE EAGLE THAT IS FORGOTTEN

*(John P. Altgeld. Born, December 30, 1847, died, March 12, 1902.)*

Sleep softly . . . eagle forgotten . . . under the stone.
Time has its way with you there, and the clay has its own.
"We have buried him now," thought your foes, and in secret rejoiced.
They made a brave show of their mourning, their hatred unvoiced.
They had snarled at you, barked at you, foamed at you day after day,
Now you were ended. They praised you . . . and laid you away.

The others that mourned you in silence and terror and truth,
The widow bereft of her crust, and the boy without youth,
The mocked and the scorned and the wounded, the lame and the poor
That should have remembered forever . . . remember no more.

Where are those lovers of yours, on what name do they call—
The lost, that in armies wept over your funeral pall?
They call on the names of a hundred high-valiant ones;
A hundred white eagles have risen, the sons of your sons.
The zeal in their wings is a zeal that your dreaming began,
The valor that wore out your soul in the service of man.

Sleep softly, . . . eagle forgotten, . . . under the stone.
Time has its way with you there and the clay has its own.
Sleep on, O brave-hearted, O wise man, that kindled the flame—

To live in mankind is far more than to live in a name,
To live in mankind, far, far more . . . than to live in a name.

This warm quality is to be seen, in a lighter vein, in "Upon Returning to the Country Road," in "Where is David, the Next King of Israel?" and "A Net to Snare the Moonlight." In these we note the growth of fantasy and whimsical extravagance which, in the ensuing volumes, come to play so great a part in Lindsay's work. Touched with an elfin charm that is both good-humored and grotesque, they reach their highest pitch in "The Light o' the Moon," a series in which different people and animals look upon the moon and each creature finds in it his own mood and disposition.

This series is continued and amplified in the succeeding volume. And so, without further introduction, I turn to *The Congo and Other Poems* (The Macmillan Company, 1914) and to two of these lively fancies from the section called "The Moon is a Mirror."

THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA

"If I could set the moon upon
This table," said my friend,
"Among the standard poets
And brochures without end,
And noble prints of old Japan,
How empty they would seem,
By that encyclopaedia
Of whim and glittering dream."

WHAT GRANDPA TOLD THE CHILDREN

The moon? It is a griffin's egg,
Hatching to-morrow night.
And how the little boys will watch
With shouting and delight
To see him break the shell and stretch

And creep across the sky.
The boys will laugh. The little girls,
I fear, may hide and cry.
Yet gentle will the griffin be,
Most decorous and fat,
And walk up to the milky way . . .
And lap it like a cat.

This volume, *The Congo and Other Poems,* gives us Lindsay's own three R's—Rhyme, Religion and Ragtime—admirably mixed. Here the worn, rubber-stamp idioms, the trade jargons of poetry, are lost in infectious and impulsive rhythms. Where Frost and Robinson reveal the soul of America, where Amy Lowell depicts the sights, Lindsay echoes the sounds of these energetic states. The howling speed, the eruptive clatter, the released vitality of a hundred electric light-signs intensify his stanzas; his words rush with the sudden exhortation of an advertisement, dance with a grotesque fervor, or snap, crackle, wink and leap with the loud rhythms of a motor-driven civilization. The chants which form the larger part of his volumes may not always be the most powerful poetry which Lindsay has written, but they are undoubtedly the most popular; they give people that primitive joy in syncopated sound that thrills them far more than critical selectiveness (a quality which even Lindsay's best friends would not claim for him) or an ingenious theory of æsthetics. These chants demand to be read aloud; they are fresh evidence of the fact that poetry is fundamentally an oral art, an art appealing to the ear rather than to the eye. And it is as an experiment in widening the borders of this song-art that they must be regarded. In pleading for a consideration of the possibilities of its development, Lindsay calls attention to the Greek lyrists who, accompanying themselves, composed their own accompaniments. "Here," he says, "is pictured a type of Greek work

VACHEL LINDSAY

From a recent photograph

which survives in American vaudeville, where every line may be two-thirds spoken and one-third sung; the entire rendering, musical and elocutionary, depending upon the improvising power and sure instinct of the performer. . . . I respectfully submit these poems," continued Lindsay, "as experiments in which I endeavor to carry this vaudeville form back towards the old Greek precedent of the half-chanted lyric. In this case the one-third of music must be added by the instinct of the reader. He must be Iophon. And he can easily be Iophon if he brings to bear upon the piece what might be called the Higher Vaudeville imagination."

It must be admitted that, to bring out their full surge and swing, it is not only necessary to hear these poems chanted, but to hear them chanted by Lindsay himself. Once having heard his highly original declamations, it is impossible for any one to forget the tunes and *tempi*. Without this variation of manner and melody—the rich unction of certain phrases contrasting sharply with the metallic *staccato* of others, the abrupt changes from a slow, deliberate *andante* to the briskest and most burly of *allegros*—much of the verse is merely rumbling and repetitive. Lindsay does his best to help his readers by means of a running fire of stage-directions along the margin of each page. But it is difficult, for any but a trained musician, to achieve half the effects he calls for. In the speed and clatter of the verses, Lindsay's admonishing voice coaching, as it were, from the side-lines, is often lost.

For all this, the title-poem is a complete success, even on the printed page. The same flaming sincerity that kindled "General Booth Enters into Heaven" turns what is noisy or extravagant in these lines to eloquence. The cold type warms with a savage, insistent beat; the roll and sweep, even without Lindsay's sonorous baritone, quicken passages prosy and

almost perfunctory by themselves. It is impossible to give any idea of this poem by mangled quotations; it is equally impossible to describe it. Nevertheless, Lindsay himself has made a heroic attempt to do so. In a letter outlining this composition he wrote: " 'The Congo' is in twelve more or less equal parts: (1) The death of a missionary on the Congo. (2) A cannibal war dance. (3) The Springfield, Illinois, race-riots. (4) The burnings-alive of negroes in the South. (5) The camp-meetings of half-wild negroes. (6) Williams and Walker's Original Comedy Company. (7) An old-time minstrel show. (8) Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* (9) Uncle Tom's Cabin. (10) The Emancipation Proclamation. (11) The songs of Stephen C. Foster, and (12) *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. Du Bois." Impossible though it is to give the power of these verses except in bulk, the first section reveals the surprising method as well as the aboriginal music:

Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room,
Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable,
Sagged and reeled and pounded on the table,
Pounded on the table,
Beat an empty barrel with the handle of a broom,
Hard as they were able,
Boom, *boom,* BOOM,—
With a silk umbrella and the handle of a broom,
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM.
THEN I had religion, THEN I had a vision.
I could not turn from their revel in derision
THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK,
*Cutting through the Jungle with a golden track.*
Then along that riverbank
A thousand miles
Tattooed cannibals danced in files;
Then I heard the boom of the blood-lust song
And a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan gong.

And "BLOOD" screamed the whistles and the fifes
of the warriors;
"BLOOD" screamed the skull-faced, lean witch-
doctors.
"Whirl ye the deadly voo-doo rattle,
Harry the uplands,
Steal all the cattle,
Rattle-rattle, rattle-rattle,
Bing!
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM,"
A roaring, epic, rag-time tune
From the mouth of the Congo
To the Mountains of the Moon.
Death is an Elephant,
Torch-eyed and horrible,
Foam-flanked and terrible,
Boom, steal the pygmies,
Boom, kill the Arabs,
Boom, kill the white men,
Hoo, Hoo, Hoo . . .
Listen to the yell of Leopold's ghost
Burning in Hell for his hand-maimed host.
Hear how the demons chuckle and yell
Cutting his hands off, down in Hell.
Listen to the creepy proclamation,
Blown through the lairs of the forest-nation;
Blown past the white-ants' hill of clay,
Blown past the marsh where the butterflies play:—
"Be careful what you do,
Or Mumbo-Jumbo, God of the Congo,
And all of the other
Gods of the Congo,
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you,
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you,
*Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you.*"

"The Santa Fé Trail," which follows this poem, is the most daring experiment in the volume, and there are about a dozen excellent æsthetic reasons why it should be a complete failure. Strangely enough, it is a complete success.

This delicate and light-hearted humoresque is sung to an orchestral accompaniment of race-horns, klaxons, trumpets, thundering motors, the mad tympani of open mufflers, and a list of cities blared through the megaphone or shouted "like a train caller in a Union depot." And all this uproar whirls around fairy interludes and scraps of fancy which somehow are not drowned in the shrieking maelstrom. So strikingly does each contrast set off the other, that the effect of the whole is startling in loveliness no less than speed.

It is in the third poem ("The Firemen's Ball") that Lindsay unconsciously reveals how this very power, when pushed beyond its limits, fails; how, as in this instance, it often falls into dogma and doggerel. It is seven parts unlovely noise and three parts uninspired nonsense. This very increase of clangor defeats itself. Poe, many years ago, accomplished the magic of mere sound; but he did it by bringing to such poor rhymes as "Ulalume" and "The Bells," a subtle music that rang new changes under the insistent reiteration.

The philosophy of "The Firemen's Ball" is even more questionable than the melody. It is its own amazing contradiction. From a roaring picture of a burning building, which is meant to symbolize the holocaust of life, Lindsay turns to the horrible (to him) glimpse of the firemen making love to their sweethearts (the baleful fires of passion mingling with the "lustful, insinuating music!") and, as a grand finale, he gives us a rumbling and negative Buddhistic sermon, quoting approvingly from a section of the Mahavagga that ends, "By absence of passion he is made free." The contradiction is in Lindsay's very treatment; he cannot get his spirit to believe in his theme. Even while he writes:

> "Life is a flame:—
> Be cold as the dew
> Would you win at the game,"

his lines refuse to obey him and go leaping along. Lindsay in this, as well as in some of the other poems, is like a man dancing gayly on the top of a windy mountain, his eyes blazing, his whole body kindled with the energy of living—and shouting all the while, "We must abolish passion! Down with Life!"

It is hard to understand this unwillingness on Lindsay's part to understand passion. It is harder to understand why he misrepresents and misinterprets it. And it is all the more strange since this passionate *élan* is his most valuable possession. The passion for making drab villages beautiful (*vide* "The Soul of the City," "I Heard Immanuel Singing" and his early broadsides); the passion for peace, as evinced in the rhetorical but earnest war poems at the end of *The Congo;* the passion for righting hideous wrongs—these are some of the passions that burn through Lindsay's work and illuminate his lines with quickening flame. There are many times, indeed, when he reminds one of the revivalist turned socialist; he has the strangely mingled passions of both. As a random example, there are these eight splendid lines:

THE LEADEN EYED

Let not young souls be smothered out before
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.

Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly,
Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap,
Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve,
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.

Or witness this fine satire with its biting whiplash in the penultimate line:

Factory windows are always broken.
Somebody's always throwing bricks;
Somebody's always heaving cinders,
Playing ugly Yahoo tricks.

Factory windows are always broken.
Other windows are let alone.
No one throws through the chapel-window
The bitter, snarling, derisive stone.

Factory windows are always broken.
Something or other is going wrong.
Something is rotten—I think, in Denmark . . .
END OF THE FACTORY-WINDOW SONG.

I pass hurriedly over the unaccountable stupidities which have been injected into the volume: the mawkish tributes to the doll-like Mary Pickford *et al.*, the "comic"-supplement humor of "When Gassy Thompson Struck It Rich"—and proceed to Lindsay's next volume.

In *The Chinese Nightingale* (The Macmillan Company, 1917) we have a similar mixture of high-flying fantasy and dogged fact, of primitive emotionalism and propaganda. The two volumes give the weird effect of Buddha dancing to a jazz band; of the doxology performed on a steam calliope; of the Twentieth Century Express running lightly over a child's flower garden; of the Reverend William Sunday and the late Bert Williams reciting the Beatitudes. The latter effect is particularly evoked by "The Booker Washington Trilogy," most strikingly in the poem "Simon Legree." It would be interesting to see what genuine negro composers like Will Marion Cook, Rosamund Johnson or H. T. Burleigh could do with this poem. Or with the "The Congo," using it as a symphony for full orchestra, reinforced by banjos, bones, marimbas, xylophones and a dark baritone solo. Or "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba" as the libretto for an opulent, Afro-Oriental cantata.

Here again one wishes for Lindsay's vocal delivery in order to receive the full vigor of these lines. But the person who can read them without feeling a part of their racy imagery and humor, is dead to poetry. No one can fail to enjoy the spectacle of the white poet speaking through the confused oratory of the old negro preacher, working up his audience and himself, and making desirable the very thing he set out to make horrible—Simon Legree being described, with loving envy, in a hell that sounds suspiciously like a poor slave's paradise. Here is the inviting climax:

> And the Devil said to Simon Legree:
> "I like your style, so wicked and free.
> Come sit and share my throne with me,
> And let us bark and revel."
> And there they sit and gnash their teeth,
> And each one wears a hop-vine wreath.
> They are matching pennies and shooting craps,
> They are playing poker and taking naps.
> And old Legree is fat and fine:
> He eats the fire, he drinks the wine—
> Blood and burning turpentine—
> Down, down with the Devil;
> Down, down with the Devil;
> Down, down with the Devil.

It is these highly original chants that have made many critics exaggerate Lindsay's standing as a bizarre innovator and minimize his importance as a serious creator. Most of his deprecators insist on discussing only the twenty per cent of his art that they think is the novelty. But even here, they are mistaken. They have taken an almost jejune attitude toward his work; they fail to realize that, when they assume he is lost in technical mazes, he is distracted little by method and not at all by form. Technical discussions rage, he surmises, because most poets are twenty-five, which is the technical age. It is therefore somewhat distressing to an

artist who has reached maturity to have his detractors protest at violations he never committed. These critics assume that "The Congo," for instance, is a new form. It is not. It is, as Lindsay has retorted, one of the oldest, most orthodox, most over-conventionalized forms in the English language:—the Ode. It is a form which, says Lindsay, has been worn out and practically dropped because it degenerated into false and pompous apostrophes. One can doubtless find precedents for every line of "The Congo" in a long array of odes in English, which have not failed to be in print simply because they were originally intended to be sung. Many times the most successful odes are not specifically so labeled and this adds to the critics' confusion. It seems probable that Lanier thought he was inventing a new form when he wrote "The Marshes of Glynn" and that Coleridge was laboring under a similar delusion when he began "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel." Lindsay is not so self-deceived and it seems an ironic injustice that he should be accused of doing or, what is still more ludicrous, failing to do the very thing he has carefully avoided even trying to do.

The defects in this volume are of an entirely different caliber. Lindsay has, in a commendable effort to extend the borders of the ode, gone a few steps farther and (taking his cue, I suspect, from Dryden's "Alexander's Feast") has expanded the chant into what he calls "Poem-Games," which add an undercurrent of alien music and the services of a dancer to the elocutionist's art. "In the 'Poem-Games,'" the author writes in an introductory note, "the English word is still first in importance, the dancer comes second, the chanter third." But, in order to keep the chanter from getting too far ahead of the dancer, the poet has been compelled to repeat insignificant and fugitive phrases, until the English word loses not only its importance but its import. For instance, observe how the simple music of "King Solo-

mon" has been attenuated and dragged out into tiresome commonplaces by devastating repetition. Notice how so slight a piece of fooling as "The Potatoes' Dance" has been lengthened far beyond the poem's limits and the reader's interest.

"Down cellar," said the cricket,
"Down cellar," said the cricket,
"Down cellar," said the cricket,
"I saw a ball last night,
In honor of a lady,
In honor of a lady,
In honor of a lady,
Whose wings were pearly-white.
The breath of bitter weather,
The breath of bitter weather,
The breath of bitter weather,
Had smashed the cellar pane.
We entertained a drift of leaves,
We entertained a drift of leaves,
We entertained a drift of leaves"
. . . *Et cetera.*

Compare this doggerel to the amazing "John Brown," which, lacking these verbal impediments, begins with a child-like catalogue and runs through negro pomposity to a picturesque and powerful close.

But Lindsay is not only the lyric interpreter of the dark race. He can play on other instruments as well as the bones and calliope. In fact, some of his strummings on the lute are even more potent though less dynamic than his improvisations for brass band. Turn to the title poem, one of Lindsay's loveliest, and see how lightly the music evokes new hints of the ancient East. Forgetting programs or pronunciamentoes, Lindsay has let his whimsical mind loose among singing idols, "golden junks in a laughing river," rainbow fishes, explanatory nightingales, river-pirates, wind-

bells, affable dragons, peacock landscapes and ghostly suggestions of a culture that was old when the Ming dynasty was young.

Elsewhere the mixture is less enticing. Pulled one way (as a poet) by the imperious demands of Beauty, and another way (as propagandist) by the moral dictates of the Uplift crusade, he shows a vacillation, almost pathetic, between a universal compulsion and, to be literal, local option. Any admirer of Lindsay will observe with distrust the growing emphasis on the sermonizing features of his work. Even his Heaven is uninviting; a Nirvana of communal kitchens, daily parades and a Beauty scrubbed and worshiped with prescribed regularity. In "The Eagle That is Forgotten," "Sunshine" and others of the poems already mentioned, there was a successful mingling of poet and pamphleteer. But in his other volumes it is somewhat disturbing to witness Lindsay hitching his clipped Pegasus in front of the meeting-house, mounting the worn-out steps and going into the pulpit to deliver himself of such orotund banalities as "God Send the Regicide," "Where is the Real Non-Resistant?" and the still flatter wordiness of rhymes like:

> When Bryan speaks, the sky is ours,
> The wheat, the forests, and the flowers.
> And who is here to say us nay?
> Fled are the ancient tyrant powers.
>
> When Bryan speaks, then I rejoice.
> His is the strange composite voice
> Of many million singing souls
> Who make world-brotherhood their choice.

When he forgets to preach, or when the preachment takes on a less predetermined and more unconscious tone (as in the highly colored "Tale of the Tiger Tree" and the brightly ironic "Here's to the Mice"), he regains his power. It is a

relief to turn to those poems in which Lindsay's native fancy is given full swing. To "The Ghosts of the Buffaloes," where he takes the reader on a midnight scamper with nothing more purposeful than the driving power of the imagination. Or to the "The Prairie Battlements." Or to the charming measures of "The Broncho That Would Not Be Broken." Here he is not trying to prove anything or convince any one; he is concerned only with trying to snare a glimmering and elusive loveliness. No village improvement societies will embroider this on their banners; no anti-vice crusaders will take it up as a slogan. And yet I like to feel that the real Lindsay is in these unofficial and merely beautiful lines.

Two impulses dominate *The Golden Whales of California* (The Macmillan Company, 1920); two tendencies that are almost opposed in mood and treatment. Sometimes the Jerusalem theme is uppermost; sometimes the jazz orchestrations drown everything else. Frequently, in the more successful pieces, there is a ragtime blend of both. But a half-ethical, half-æsthetic indecision, an inability to choose between what most delights Lindsay and what his hearers prefer is the outstanding effect—and defect—of this collection. Lindsay, the grotesque entertainer, he of the moaning saxophone and the squawking clarinet, is continually disturbing—and being disturbed by—Lindsay the mystic, the cross-roads missionary.

Had Lindsay been let alone, he would undoubtedly have developed the romantically religious strain so pronounced in his earliest pamphlets—the strain that was amplified in *General Booth Enters into Heaven* and extended in that *tour de force* of spiritual syncopation, "The Congo." But, with the sweeping success of the latter poem, a new element began to exert a potent influence on Lindsay's subsequent work: the element of popularity which, beginning by smiling on the

astonished poet, immediately made fresh demands of him. Audiences called for more drums and brassier cymbals. And Lindsay complied. The surge and gusto of "The Congo," the uncanny power of "Simon Legree," the basic dignity of "John Brown" were forgotten and only their loudest, most sensational, lowest-common-denominator qualities retained. Result: "The Daniel Jazz," "The Blacksmith's Serenade," "The Apple Blossom Snow Blues," "Davy Jones' Door-Bell," "A Doll's Arabian Nights." Undeniably light-hearted and humorous some of these are; their incongruities and release of animal spirits are contagious, particularly when the audience helps to make them a communal performance. But Lindsay is beginning to step over the delicate line that separates buoyance (and even boisterousness) from burlesque. He continues to broaden his effects, to over-emphasize his tympanic tricks; he begins to depend too much on the stuffed trumpet and a freak battery of percussion. Lindsay, at least this phase of him, is the chief exponent of a movement that might be called (if the chauvinists will permit an umlaut) an American *Uberbrett'l.* But, pandering to a cruder response, what (in "The Santa Fé Trail," "The Congo," "King Solomon") was dedicated to the shrine of a Higher Vaudeville, is now offered on the platform of a lower cabaret.

> "His sweetheart and his mother were Christian and meek.
> They washed and ironed for Darius every week.
> One Thursday he met them at the door:—
> Paid them as usual, but acted sore.
>
> "He said:—'Your Daniel is a dead little pigeon.
> He's a good hard worker, but he talks religion.'
> And he showed them Daniel in the Lion's cage.
> Daniel standing quietly, the lions in a rage. . . .

"Thus roared the lions:—
'We want Daniel, Daniel, Daniel,
We want Daniel, Daniel, Daniel.
Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.'"

It is too easy a laugh to be proud of. And in the delightful Rhymed Scenario dedicated to Mae Marsh, the whimsy and delicate colors of Lindsay's pattern are broken by the raucous refrain. Romance yields to tinsel; the gaudy rhythms, the lit run-way and the entire New York Winter Garden chorus are summoned by lines like:

*Oh, quivering lights,*
*Arabian Nights!*
*Bagdad!*
*Bagdad!*

Politically, Lindsay is even less compelling. He has a score of confident though contradictory ideals, a hundred factional idols. Experience does not make Lindsay more critical; he never seems to lose an illusion. On the contrary, he assimilates new slogans, new causes, new enthusiasms with an incredible appetite and an iron digestion. There is something sublime about a nature that can celebrate, with blithe impartiality and equal vigor, John L. Sullivan, Prohibition, Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, Kerensky, Mary Pickford, localism, Americanism, Internationalism, Campbellism. On one page Lindsay exhorts us to Sew the Flags Together, an inspiring appeal which is preceded by the crude and pompously jingoistic information that

. . . now old Andrew Jackson fights
To set the sad, big world to rights.
He joins the British and the French.
He cheers up the Italian trench.

He's making Democrats of these,
And freedom's sons of Japanese.
His hobby-horse will gallop on
Till all the infernal Huns are gone.

And (in "Shantung") there is, in three lines, a significant and astonishing assemblage:

*In the light of the maxims of Chesterfield, Mencius,*
*Wilson, Roosevelt, Tolstoy, Trotzky,*
*Franklin or Nietzsche, how great was Confucius?*

This undeviating catholicity proves nothing so much as the fact that Lindsay is not, as he fondly believes, a politically-minded person, a reconstructive philosopher. In his ready admiration, he is a radiant, undiscriminating emotionalist; even when he thinks he thinks, it is strong feeling that impels him. It is this very lack of intellectual *finesse* that makes his religious rhymes so obviously robust. "John Brown," one of our finest interpretations of native folk-lore and possibly the noblest poem Lindsay has achieved, is full of a reverent sonority. So is that strange tract, "A Rhymed Address to All Renegade Campbellites Exhorting Them to Return." And the first of the Campbell trilogy, entitled "My Fathers Came from Kentucky," is even more surprisingly successful.

It is only when one pauses to synthesize Lindsay's attitude to life, that one is struck by his amazing distrust of it. Life and (with even greater emphasis) passion are never accepted by him as conditions through which the ordinary world passes. They are, on the contrary, the wildest and most dangerous traps to snare the soul. In the earlier "The Firemen's Ball," life is compared to a burning building, roaring with the flames of lust. The fire-obsession persists. Here in one of his most recent poems, Lindsay returns to the fantasy:

The door has a bolt.
The window a grate.
O friend, we are trapped
In the factory, Fate!

"The flames pierce the ceiling; the brands heap the floor" —and what can save us? anxiously inquires the poet of his sweetheart. And it is love, of all things—The Fire-Laddie, Love—which is to extinguish the fire and rescue them from life! It is a queer mixture of fascination and fear that keeps Lindsay dreaming of a spotless and almost sexless love. His emotions are not so much Buddhistic as determinedly innocent; the great sin is not growing wicked but growing up. In that naïve echo of childhood "For All Who Ever Sent Lace Valentines," Lindsay expresses this phase in another guise:

"The lion of loving,
The terrible lion,
Woke in the two
Long before they could wed.
The world said: 'Child hearts,
You must keep till the summer.
It is not allowed
That your hearts should be red.'"

And Lindsay concludes:

"Were I god of the village
My servants should mate them.
Were I priest of the church
I would set them apart.
If the wide state were mine
It should live for such darlings,
And hedge with all shelter
The child-wedded heart."

"The child-wedded heart." It is, in spite of a frequent violence of manner, the apotheosis of this poet. Is it unnatural that such a genuinely ascetic and childhood-yearning

spirit should overcompensate by flying from the extremes of hushed intimacies and whispered dream-stuff to the limits of brassy declamations? This very backward-turning hunger drives Lindsay to his best achievements. He shines brightest not in the rôle of prophet, politician, or jazz-conductor but in the far more homely part of country chronicler, the reminiscent collector of the strange *minutiæ* that compose the background of ruralism. It is the inspired reporter that, after a turgid beginning, builds so powerful a climax in "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan" (that amazing compound of mid-western vigor and American Esperanto) or turns (in "John L. Sullivan, the Strong Boy of Boston") an almanac of 1889 into a humorous panorama.

In 1923, The Macmillan Company brought out a *Collected Poems* which contains all of Lindsay's previous work, with a valuable preface and several new poems. One of these added pieces illustrates the difficulties in which Lindsay's natural extravagance frequently lands him. "Litany of The Heroes" is epical in conception, muddled and monotonous in execution. It is a rhymed list of twenty-four famous characters of history, closing with—I quote Lindsay's own estimate of his incredible *finale*—"Socrates and Woodrow Wilson as the two men who point to the future!" And yet it is this very catholicity, this uncritical exuberance that impels the best of his galloping meters. It is the whimsical buoyancy, the side-spring, the happy appraisals which prevent Lindsay the missionary from completely converting Lindsay the minstrel.

# EDGAR LEE MASTERS

Born in the little town of Garnett, Kansas, in 1869, of old Puritan and pioneering stock, Edgar Lee Masters was wholly unknown until 1915 when his *Spoon River Anthology* (The Macmillan Company) became—*mirabile dictu*—a best-seller. Had Masters written nothing but this one volume or had he gained sufficient critical determination to publish nothing less distinguished, he would have remained the most arresting figure in contemporary poetry. As it is, *Spoon River Anthology* will, by virtue of its extraordinary power and originality, preserve its author's name long after his earlier and subsequent efforts are forgotten. Before his chief work, Masters wrote over four hundred poems and published five books of verse (blank verse plays and a collection of his essays appeared without recognition), one of them as early as 1895 and two of them under pseudonyms. They were the usual thing in rhyme and regular meters—verses born of the desire to write rather than the imperative need for expression—honest attempts, workmanlike, literary, undistinguished. Fragments of Shelley mingled with scraps from Browning and distorted echoes of Shakespeare. A passage from *Maximilian* (published by Richard G. Badger in 1902) is typical:

"No more!
Oh, tragic news! I thank thee, God in heaven,
Who set my sweet Carlotta's spirit free.
No more! then never more to struggle here,
Like some bright planet buffeted with clouds.
One tie the less to bind me to the world.
No more! no more! I cannot deem her dead—
She lives, for me as ever."

Up to 1913, Masters had been writing the amaranthine-asphodel type of poetry that is common to every poet and belongs to none of them. Then something happened. Miss Harriet Monroe had founded *Poetry* in 1911; and that intransigent little monthly, dedicating most of its pages to new and frankly experimental tendencies in contemporary verse, had introduced and helped create an audience for many writers, including Tagore, Lindsay, Pound and Sandburg. It was (according to its editor) the reading of much of the free verse appearing in this magazine, especially that of Sandburg, that shook Masters out of his literary rut and spurred him to a more outspoken radicalism. Even before this, the late William Marion Reedy had advised him to discard his thrice-told romances and turn to the living world about him. As early as 1909, Reedy had spoken to him of the raciness of all great literature and, in furtherance of his theory, had pressed a copy of the Greek Anthology upon him. The terse style of these epitaphs made a deep impression upon Masters and "Hod Putt," "Serepta the Scold," "Amanda Barker" and "The Unknown"—the first written and first printed sketches of *Spoon River Anthology*—appeared in Reedy's *Mirror*, May 29, 1914. Through this friendship with Reedy and Sandburg, Masters found his native power and, discarding the old *formulæ* of an alien beauty, he turned to Southern Illinois for his poetic substance.

Dirt, darkness, disillusion; an insistence on looking at what is morbid and perverted, a preoccupation with sex, moral obliquity—these were a few of the literary crimes charged against the author when his detractors wearied of attacking the form of his work. What they failed to see was that the evidence of decay in his people was not a perversion of Mr. Masters but a true version of the gradual dissolution of so many communities that wither and are

forgotten. Whether it be Bernadotte or Havana, Illinois, or any mid-Western or New England village that has gone to seed, the background is essentially that of a tawdry clutter of houses and hotels, a few reminders of a once prosperous past, a mill that has closed down. "'All is changed save the river and the hill.' That is the secret of Spoon River," said the *New York Tribune,* "and it is as the record of a failure, of an American community passed over and with its face turned to the past, that the book is to be judged."

But the book must be judged as something much more than this. It must be given a place of undisputed importance, first, for the veracity of Mr. Masters' report; second, for the poetry in which he framed it. With the logic of art, Masters modeled his concise pen-pictures on the brief legends found on tombstones, so that his dead, supposedly writing the truth about themselves, chiseled his utterance for him. This necessity for condensation gave the individual poems not only the quality of epitaphs but of epigrams.

Apart from the admirable form in which Masters cast these abrupt monologues, the book lives as definitely as the village which it reflects. Through these frank revelations, the drab town is recreated, typical and unvarnished, with all its intrigues, hypocrisies, petty feuds, martyrdoms and occasional exaltations. The defeat of ideals, the frustrated groping toward unworthy goals—all that which is enlarged in *Main Street* (a volume that would never have been written had it not been for its predecessor) is here synthesized.

The prologue provides the background and sets the key for the entire work.

THE HILL

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozer,
the fighter?
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, on the hill.

Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith,
The tender heart, the simple soul, the loud, the proud, the happy one?—
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

One died in shameful child-birth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,
One of a broken pride, in the search for heart's desire,
One after life in far-away London and Paris
Was brought to her little space by Ella and Kate and Mag—
All, all, are sleeping, sleeping on the hill. . . .

Where is Old Fiddler Jones
Who played with life all his ninety years,
Braving the sleet with bared breast,
Drinking, rioting, thinking neither of wife nor kin,
Nor gold, nor love, nor heaven?
Lo! he babbles of the fish-frys of long ago,
Of the horse-races of long ago at Clary's Grove,
Of what Abe Lincoln said
One time at Springfield.

There are times when the author has revealed much of America in microcosm. And there are other times when he seems to have seen his environment through a haze of disillusion, a fog that distorts people and perspectives; times when he has not reached far enough beneath the surface dramas of the characters, when he seems to mistake the grocery-store gossip, the sewing-circle scandal for the foundation and superstructure of the whole community. And yet there are scores of instances where Masters has been

absolutely faithful to his *dramatis personæ*. There is no doubt that, though his setting is a cemetery, most of his dead people are more truly alive than the living characters of the majority of American novelists.

Immediately following "The Hill," the first mouthful of dust stirs into speech and the first of Masters's buried villagers hails us from his grave.

HOD PUTT

Here I lie close to the grave
Of Old Bill Piersol,
Who grew rich trading with the Indians, and who
Afterwards took the bankrupt law
And emerged from it richer than ever.
Myself grown tired of toil and poverty
And beholding how Old Bill and others grew in wealth,
Robbed a traveler one night near Proctor's Grove.
Killing him unwittingly while doing so,
For the which I was tried and hanged.
That was my way of going into bankruptcy.
Now we who took the bankrupt law in our respective ways
Sleep peacefully side by side.

A few pages further on we have the splendid duplicate pictures "Benjamin Pantier" and "Mrs. Benjamin Pantier" —a reminiscence of the old-fashioned sentimental frames for two pictures—with a difference.

BENJAMIN PANTIER

Together in this grave lie Benjamin Pantier, attorney at law,
And Nig, his dog, constant companion, solace and friend.
Down the gray road, friends, children, men and women,
Passing one by one out of life, left me till I was alone
With Nig for partner, bed-fellow, comrade in drink.

In the morning of life I knew aspiration and saw glory.
Then she, who survives me, snared my soul
With a snare which bled me to death,
Till I, once strong of will, lay broken, indifferent,
Living with Nig in a room back of a dingy office.
Under my jaw-bone is snuggled the bony nose of Nig—
Our story is lost in silence. Go by, mad world!

MRS. BENJAMIN PANTIER

I know that he told that I snared his soul
With a snare which bled him to death.
And all the men loved him,
And most of the women pitied him.
But suppose you are really a lady, and have delicate tastes,
And loathe the smell of whiskey and onions.
And the rhythm of Wordsworth's "Ode" runs in your ears,
While he goes about from morning till night
Repeating bits of that common thing;
"Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?"
And then, suppose,
You are a woman well endowed,
And the only man with whom the law and morality
Permit you to have the marital relation
Is the very man that fills you with disgust
Every time you think of it—while you think of it
Every time you see him?
That's why I drove him away from home
To live with his dog in a dingy room
Back of his office.

Masters is fond of these ironic contrasts. He delights in displaying both sides of the medal—particularly when one side is badly mutilated. He seems to take a grim satisfaction whenever the accepted romantic element is destroyed by a sharp reversal of formula. Such an effective coupling lends an added poignance to the sardonic tragedies in one of the most memorable of his double exposures.

ALBERT SCHIRDING

Jonas Keene thought his lot a hard one
Because his children were all failures.
But I know of a fate more trying than that:
It is to be a failure while your children are successes.
For I raised a brood of eagles
Who flew away at last, leaving me
A crow on the abandoned bough.
Then, with the ambition to prefix Honorable to my name,
And thus to win my children's admiration,
I ran for County Superintendent of Schools,
Spending my accumulations to win—and lost.
That fall my daughter received first prize in Paris
For her picture, entitled, "The Old Mill"—
(It was of the water mill before Henry Wilkin put in steam.)
The feeling that I was not worthy of her finished me.

JONAS KEENE

Why did Albert Schirding kill himself
Trying to be County Superintendent of Schools,
Blest as he was with the means of life
And wonderful children, bringing him honor
Ere he was sixty?
If even one of my boys could have run a news-stand,
Or one of my girls could have married a decent man,
I should not have walked in the rain
And jumped into bed with clothes all wet,
Refusing medical aid.

The volume itself may be roughly divided into three rather well-defined groups. In the first of these we have the power of plain statement, usually heightened by a matter-of-fact humor; the second and largest division has disillusion as its motive; the third lifts both statement and disillusion to a plane of exaltation. Nothing could be more indicative of the mood of the first group than "Roscoe Purkapile," "Mrs.

Purkapile," "Russian Sonia," "Barney Hainsfeather," "Penniwit, the Artist," "Roger Heston."

The ironic impulse of the second division dominates the book; its most impressive and remarkable turns of mood may be seen in "Indignation Jones," "Margaret Fuller Slack," "George Trimble," "Amos Sibley," "Editor Whedon," "Walter Simmons," "Bert Kessler," "Enoch Dunlap" (the bitterest denunciation in the collection), the caustic "Daisy Fraser," the mock-epic "The Spooniad," and "Harry Wilmans," that rises to a brutal, impassioned outcry.

HARRY WILMANS

I was just turned twenty-one,
And Henry Phipps, the Sunday-school superintendent,
Made a speech in Bindle's Opera House.
"The honor of the flag must be upheld," he said,
"Whether it be assailed by a barbarous tribe of Tagalogs
Or the greatest power in Europe."
And we cheered and cheered the speech and the flag he
waved
As he spoke.
And I went to the war in spite of my father,
And followed the flag till I saw it raised
By our camp in a rice field near Manila,
And all of us cheered and cheered it.
But there were flies and poisonous things
And there was the deadly water,
And the cruel heat,
And the sickening, putrid food;
And the smell of the trench just back of the tents
Where the soldiers went to empty themselves;
And there were the whores who followed us, full of syphilis;
And beastly acts between ourselves or alone,
With bullying, hatred, degradation among us,
And days of loathing and nights of fear
To the hour of the charge through the steaming swamp,
Following the flag.

Till I fell with a scream, shot through the guts.
Now there's a flag over me in Spoon River!
A flag! A flag!

The third group, an eloquent contradiction to those detractors who granted Masters nothing but a crude and static irony, contains some of the most condensed pieces of poignance that contemporary literature offers. For sheer tenderness one will find few things more touching than "Doc Hill" and "Emily Sparks"; for restrained pathos one cannot turn to many short poems more noble than "Washington McNeely," "Hare Drummer" or "Pauline Barrett." Sometimes this mood is merged with a challenging defiance; passion for a truth too long repressed surges out of "Shack Dye," "Griffy, the Cooper" and, in a starker voice, from

CARL HAMBLIN

The press of the Spoon River *Clarion* was wrecked,
And I was tarred and feathered,
For publishing this on the day the Anarchists were hanged
in Chicago:
"I saw a beautiful woman with bandaged eyes
Standing on the steps of a marble temple.
Great multitudes passed in front of her,
Lifting their faces to her imploringly.
In her left hand she held a sword.
She was brandishing the sword,
Sometimes striking a child, again a laborer,
Again a slinking woman, again a lunatic.
In her right hand she held a scale;
Into the scale pieces of gold were tossed
By those who dodged the strokes of the sword.
A man in a black gown read from a manuscript:
'She is no respecter of persons.'
Then a youth wearing a red cap
Leaped to her side and snatched away the bandage.
And lo, the lashes had been eaten away
From the oozy eyelids;

The eyeballs were seared with a milky mucus;
The madness of a dying soul
Was written on her face—
But the multitude saw why she wore the bandage."

Though the note of definite affirmation is far from a dominant one in this volume, there are moments when the exaltation culminates in a *crescendo* of praise. The last part of the volume points definitely upward (a direction which the first part emphasizes by contrast) and such poems as "Ann Rutledge," that inferential tribute to Lincoln, and "Isaiah Beethoven" are not only affirmative but prophetic. Without Robinson's *finesse* or delicacy of analysis, Masters achieves a similar sharpness of definition. Musical only rarely, and then seemingly by accident, his are the properties of the novelist; seldom rounded, broad rather than delicate in treatment, his drawings of character are silhouettes of circumstance. Sometimes he captures the thought behind the comments of his people and ascends into a sort of casual rhapsody. Such a high note is this apostrophe to the sheer vitality of life.

LUCINDA MATLOCK

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
And played snap-out at Winchester.
One time we changed partners,
Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,
And then I found Davis.
We were married and lived together for seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,

And many a flower and medicinal weed—
Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.
At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
And passed to a sweet repose.
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you—
It takes life to love life.

It is an almost tragic thing to leave these heights and turn to Masters' many succeeding volumes. Except for occasional flashes, they do not seem to be the work of the same man. With *Spoon River Anthology* Masters arrived—and left. The ensuing trio are an elaborate return to his first heavily rhetorical style; they make the famous volume seem something of an inexplicable miracle. In that one extended burst, Masters accomplished greatness; he wrote not only a powerful book but a popular one. Its unprecedented success must have startled Masters as much as it did his critics. At any rate, it seemed to give him an unsettling respect for himself, a respect touched with a bit of awe. Evidently impressed by the least vital thing in Spoon River, its philosophizing, Masters blossomed forth as a thinker, a late discoverer of scientific platitudes, a babbling oracle. Monologue after tiresome monologue issued from him; he began to give erudite explanations of the metrical construction of his essentially casual lines; he came to distrust those critics who hailed his work as anything less than a *Comédie Humaine.* In short, he began to take both himself and his art with a pontifical seriousness. Turn to the three subsequent volumes. The mantle of a pedagogic prophet is put on in *Songs and Satires;* in *The Great Valley,* a jumbled scientific learning sits heavily on the poet; in *Toward the Gulf,* he sinks beneath it.

Examine *Songs and Satires* (The Macmillan Company, 1916). The indulgent reader will forgive the inclusion of such obviously resurrected trifles as "Rain in My Heart," "When Under the Icy Eaves," "What You Will" and similar flat sentimentalities. One passes these hurriedly for the sake of the fire that was left over, for the few strong and searching poems like "In the Cage," "Arabel" and the sonorous majesty of "Silence," that begins:

I have known the silence of the stars and of the sea
And the silence of the city when it pauses,
And the silence of a man and a maid,
And the silence for which music alone finds the word,
And the silence of the woods before the winds of spring
begin,
And the silence of the sick
When their eyes roam about the room.
And I ask: For the depths
Of what use is language?
A beast of the field moans a few times
When death takes its young:
And we are voiceless in the presence of realities—
We cannot speak.

But what is more distressing than the large amount of juvenile prettiness is the verbosity of the better pieces. Masters begins to run on alarmingly. The laconic pioneer has developed into a self-conscious and all too-loquacious mystic. "So We Grew Together" is a weakening of the least of the historic epitaphs, lengthened to two hundred and fifty lines; "The Loop" is a hundred-line list, a small part of which runs:

And now the rows of windows showing laces,
Silks, draperies and furs and costly vases,
Watches and mirrors, silver cups and mugs,
Emeralds, diamonds, Indian, Persian rugs,
Hats, velvets, silver buckles, ostrich-plumes,

Drugs, violet water, powder and perfumes.
Here is a monstrous winking eye, beneath
A showcase by an entrance full of teeth.
Here rubber coats, umbrellas, mackintoshes,
Hoods, rubber boots and arctics and galoshes.
Here is half a block of overcoats,
Then windows of fine linen, snakewood canes,
Scarfs, opera hats, in use where fashion reigns.

This, it can be seen, is scarcely a poem at all; it is a pocket-guide, an uninteresting advertisement, a rhymed version of Sears, Roebuck's fall catalogue. And it is still harder to excuse the sixteen pages of two poor Arthurian ballads when, in the same book, one is confronted with six crowded sheets of banalities like "St. Francis and Lady Clare" which ends:

Antonio cursed St. Clare in rhyme
And took to wine and got the lime
Of hatred on his soul, in time
Grew healed though left a little lame,
And laughed about it in his prime;
When he could see with crystal eyes
That love is a winged thing which flies;
Some break the wings, some let them rise
From earth like God's dove to the skies
Diffused in heavenly flame.

Even the racy politics of Bryan's movements in "The Cocked Hat" cannot save this volume from its flabby desuetude.

The faults are intensified in *The Great Valley,* published the same year (The Macmillan Company, 1916). Where *Songs and Satires* suffered principally from incoherence, this tome crumbles beneath an even greater weight of words. Masters, in this collection, begins to grow more bookish, more studiously oracular. What seems to be a new interest

(or an old interest that has found belated courage to declare itself) in modern scientific and creative research, has provoked a mass of writing from Masters which is neither scientific nor creative. What makes so much of *The Great Valley* such unstimulating reading is that Masters himself has evidently read so much. Going through the volume is like going through a large and curiously assorted library, a library somewhat musty, formidable and haphazardly arranged—where the works of Dr. Sigmund Freud are found between lectures by John Cowper Powys and *Gems from the Poets*. Only too much preoccupation with books could give that blinking and pseudo-scientific air that persists in his later work. With its echoes of Darwin and Gobineau, all it lacks is the usual fantastic jumble of statistics, speculations and data of skull sutures, cephalic indices, etc.

This effort to plumb the depths of evolution in poetry is fatal; it turns such a poem as "To a Spirochæta" into a humorless parody of itself; it reduces "My Dog Ponto" to stodgy statement and philosophic puerility; it makes "The Furies" a piece of mystical bombast; it hardens the dry facts of "Autocthon" in even dryer language. It is not that Masters is too fond of his facts (as some of his critics have suggested); he is not fond enough of them. He does not care so much for the thing itself as for the thought it suggests—and that thought touches something in Masters that is, in its way, as archaic and didactic as the tone of the despised Victorians and as mystico-moralizing as the most sermon-loving of the New England group.

Technically, the falling-off is equally great. His attempts at long-winded flights rumble noisily but seldom ascend. The number of themes is amazing, but they are used with surprisingly little variety and his own native utterance is almost entirely lacking. One sometimes hears the voice of Edgar Lee Masters, but it is scarcely recognizable among the con-

fusing echoes of Browning, Darwin, Stephen Phillips and Alfred Tennyson. It is impossible to believe that the man who wrote "Washington McNeely" could ever write (and, what is worse, would print) such jargon as "The Tavern," "Bombyx" and "The Furies," or such antiquated echoes as "Apollo at Pherae" and "Marsyas." Incredible as it seems, the latter actually begins:

> Pallas Athena, in an hour of ease
> From guarding states and succoring the wise,
> Pressed wistfully her lips against a flute
> Made by a Phrygian youth from resonant wood
> Cut near Sangerius. Upon a bank
> Made sweet by daisies and anemone
> She sat with godly wisdom exercised
> Blowing her breath against the stubborn tube
> That it might answer and vibrate in song.

*Toward the Gulf* (The Macmillan Company, 1918), *Starved Rock* (The Macmillan Company, 1919), *Domesday Book* (The Macmillan Company, 1920), *The Open Sea* (The Macmillan Company, 1921), all appeared in hasty succession. And in all of them there is the same jumble of great truth and greater bathos. We begin to suspect that what was sometimes charged against *Spoon River* may be true of Masters—that he has an uncertain power of analysis but no gift for synthesis. Masters' mind seems cluttered with ideas and it is the clutter that strikes one most forcibly. The three books show a confusion of many things, a clear vision of but few. Instead of poignance flashed in a dozen words or characters set off in a dozen lines, we have (in *Toward the Gulf*) eight pages of "Botanical Gardens," twenty pages of wearisome narrative mixed with scraps of Mendelism (as in "Dr. Scudder's Clinical Lecture"), interminable histories like "Excluded Middle," where all the familiar truths of heredity and sex are paraded at length

with a great show of discovery;—the platitudinous in terms of the pathological. The contents reveal how a legal mind may mistake testimony for truth—to say nothing of beauty. Even analytical poetry suffers when it seems nothing so much as metrical arrangements of reports from the Journal of Abnormal Psychology. . . . But turn to the less personal poems. The title-poem of the volume begins:

> From the Cordilleran Highlands,
> From the Height of Land
> Far north.
> From the Lake of the Woods,
> From Rainy Lake,
> From Itasca's springs.
> From the snow and the ice
> Of the mountains,
> Breathed on by the sun,
> And given life,
> Awakened by kisses of fire,
> Moving, gliding as brightest hyaline
> Down the cliffs,
> Down the hills,
> Over the stones.
> Trickling as rills . . .

and so on, proceeding in this vein for nearly two hundred lines. The total effect is deadening; the words dash over the mind without pause or incitement. And yet the most amazing exhibit in *Toward the Gulf* is the poem "Delilah" that starts its forty stanzas with:

> Because thou wast most delicate,
> A woman fair for men to see,
> The earth did compass thy estate,
> Thou didst hold life and death in fee,
> And every soul did bend the knee.
>
> Much pleasure also made thee grieve
> For that the goblet had been drained.

Courtesy of The Macmillan Company

EDGAR LEE MASTERS

The well spiced viand thou didst leave
To frown on want whose throat was strained,
And violence whose hands were stained . . .

There are, of course, few things in the volume as feeble and silly as this. There are, moreover, three poems which, though unimportant as poetry, are notable as studies in character and satire. They are "The World Saver" (a forceful portrait of "Thomas Paine" and a bitter arraignment of America's neglect of one of its most passionate liberators); "Bertrand and Gourgaud Talk over Old Times" (a reminiscence of Napoleon, pictured as the great democrat, betrayed and broken by autocratic England because of his dream of democracy); and "Front the Ages with a Smile" (a more direct and scornful showing-up of hypocrisy and complacence, revealed in the hatred of Voltaire). These make a compelling trio. There are also several fine phrases in "To-morrow is My Birthday," but this frankly sexual interpretation of Shakespeare would be more impressive if Frank Harris had not done the thing far better in prose and if Edwin Arlington Robinson (in "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford") had not completely overshadowed it in poetry. This fragment strikes the key:

Now you see that I
Have not grown from a central dream, but grown
Despite a wound, and over the wound, and used
My flesh to heal my flesh. My love's a fever
Which longed for that which nursed the malady,
And fed on that which still preserved the ill,
The uncertain, sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Has left me.

*Domesday Book,* the most ambitious and in some ways the most nearly successful volume since *Spoon River,* spreads

its story on a wider canvas, a panoramic vista crowded with a multitude of details. The mechanics are the methods of *The Ring and The Book,* the plot is the life of a girl who has died mysteriously near Starved Rock. From forty different angles, we learn the history of this girl, her backgrounds, her experiences, her dreams—and those of the narrators. Struggle is in these pages, a flagellating honesty, a brooding seriousness. But what gives these monologues the air of dullness is the fact that all of the speakers (in spite of their differences in class, education, and environment) talk in exactly the same garrulous, rhetorical idiom. Sometimes the locutions are so stilted that they become flatly absurd. On one page Mrs. Murray is made to say, "Take Poverty and *chuck him out*"—and, in the next breath, she is permitted to utter such rotund Shakespearian constructions as:

> You punish where no punishment should be,
> Weaken and break the soul. You weight the soul
> With idols and with symbols meaningless.

The sheriff, after certain racy sentences, falls into the same oratorical diction and, doubtless remembering Patience on her monument, persists in dispensing such elegances as:

> She sat
> Like a child upon an asp's nest picking flowers.

Gottlieb Gerald, the piano-maker, speaks in an even more pompous and technical vein. Thus:

> And then, as all before,
> The problem is how much of mind to use,
> How much of instinct, phototropic sense,
> That turns instinctively to light—green worms
> More plant than animals are eyes all over
> Because their bodies know the light, no eyes
> Where sight is centralized.

Even a business man in Fairbanks is made to utter tropes like:

> And in the valleys
> Darkness remained; Orician ebony
> Is not more black.

It is this devastating sameness of speech that blurs the artist's pictures. And this is a genuine pity. For, in spite of the preponderance of lengthy philosophizing couched in colorless blank verse, there is always present an intensive analysis that is, at base, a spiritual seeking. But it is spiritual groping without control; intensity without rapture. Never once do these probing lines crystallize in one flaming moment; never do they fuse and glow with that heat which is the burning core of poetry. Passion is dealt with, studied, invoked, dissected, slid under the microscope. Yet the essence of it dissolves, its very nature escapes.

Meanwhile, what has become of the simple recorder of Doc Hill and Minerva Jones? What has happened to the poet who caught us with the power of his keen and clipped accents, stripping the verbiage from an overornate poetry? His fearlessness was inspiring; the stark beauty of his great work indubitable, its vigor swept aside prejudice and precedents. Disillusioned yet visionary; a harsh insistence on the ugliness of reality clashing with a determined idealism; the swift irony, the searching cynicism, the satirical sympathy—what became of these? Briefly, a return to type. Inflated rhapsodies that turn to rant; an intellectual pitch that expresses itself in a mood that is high-flown instead of high. And the most characteristic gift of Masters—his direct and clean-cut speech? It has, except for odd moments, gone back into the triturated jargon from which he once reacted so strongly.

In short, the last half-dozen volumes of Masters present the spectacle of a bard caught in the tangle of many philoso-

phies. We may be observing the *débâcle* of a poet and (as his recent fiction seems to indicate) the rise of a novelist. If Masters can rid himself of the Browning-Shakespeare *patois* with which he wearies even his staunchest admirers, there are few limits to his possible achievement. If he can forget the studied inflection of greatness, forget the accents of his conflicting gods and learn once more to talk like Edgar Lee Masters, his future may be as spectacular as his past. Meanwhile there is always that landmark, the *Spoon River Anthology.*

II

# AMY LOWELL

No one has fought, in theory and in practice, the battles for the experimental artist, for a wider æsthetic appreciation with more determination than Amy Lowell. And no one has shown such ability to learn from her own experiments. Preëminently the poet of the external world, her later work pierces the shining surfaces of her technic. Poet, propagandist (she was one of the first members of the Imagists and three collections of their work were published in America under her supervision), lecturer, translator, biographer, critic . . . her verve is almost as remarkable as her verse.

To understand her multiple activities one must understand at least two of the American qualities that lie at the root of her diverse energies. I refer to the national zest for argument and even more national love of change. Both are salient characteristics of our youth. But where the former is a sort of spasmodic exercise, an enjoyment of intellectual athletics, the latter is nothing less than a vast and sometimes devastating passion. This country, a credulous child, has always responded to every new fad, cult, school, movement, theory and crusade. No one nation has ever had an appetite for so many formulas, invented so many subdivisions of creeds, fought so lustily for panaceas and programs which it discarded almost immediately in favor of newer ones. For every prohibition that has been urged, we have become intoxicated with a dozen different enthusiasms. No nation or group of nationalities has ever experimented in so many fields at one time. Our sudden and short-lived

enthusiasms are staggering; we attempt queer blends of new religions, new sciences, new politics, New Thought. Our departures range all the way from Mormonism to osteopathy. We are, as a nation, the chief disciples of the Simple Life, secret orders, Christian Science, M. Coué, Virtue by Legislation, the "art" of the moving picture. And yet our lust for novelty springs from an unresting curiosity that is a vital sign of growth. Having practically no traditions of our own, we are always nibbling, with a cheerful impartiality of taste, at old standards and temporary innovations.

This national restlessness is what underlies Amy Lowell's amazing versatility. Through all her work runs an eager inquisitiveness; it accounts for her preoccupation with technic, color, form and the surfaces of art. It explains why so definitely American a poet could write so sympathetic and authoritative a volume on foreign tendencies as her *Six French Poets* (The Macmillan Company, 1915). It is her catholicity of taste, her subjugation of prejudices that make such a book not only a notable interpretation but a contribution to criticism. "A critic," Huneker has written, "will never be a catholic critic of his native literature or art if he does not know the literatures and arts of other lands. . . . Because of our uncritical parochialism, America is comparable to a cemetery of *clichés.*" The truth of this metaphor is questionable to-day—and no one more than Miss Lowell has helped to sweep out the mounds of rubber-stamps, the accumulation of *clichés,* to turn our literary graveyards into living places. She has fought the poetic cant-words, the stereotyped expressions with a vigor that is seemingly inexhaustible. Scorn, diatribes, ridicule and opponents cannot cripple her; she seems to feed on them. Momentarily downed, she comes up smiling, fresh for the attack with a larger assortment of high-power expletives than before. A female Roosevelt among the Parnassians.

This brings me to a reconsideration of that pugnacious native quality which Miss Lowell so strikingly represents. This phase, I must qualify, is more obvious in her public pronouncements, her prefaces, her lectures, than in her poetry. But her creative work invites, even incites, combat. And it succeeds in its purpose. No poet living in America has been more fought for, fought against and generally fought about than Amy Lowell. The thing which has stirred so many admirations and antagonisms is her implied and often direct challenge to the lazily sentimental reader as well as to the placid manufacturers of predigested verse. It is this positive quality that has caused so much opposition, especially among negative people. For nothing is so irritating to the complacent mind as a person who tries to stir it up. And nothing is more characteristic of Miss Lowell than her power to arouse. Nor has she been an advocate merely for her school, a special pleader. It is true that in her critical work and general discussions she has taken up the sword for *vers libre* and the Imagists most frequently; but she has also wielded a lusty cudgel for all of the radicals in poetry and for all the new tendencies in the other arts as well. Nothing could be more descriptive of her dual rôle—the combination of poet and propagandist—than the title of her second volume, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. . . . But I am proceeding too rapidly. There is the first volume still to be considered.

In *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912) it is difficult to discover even the proverbial "promise" of most first books. It is hard to believe that our most consistent innovator could have written such wholly trite verses as the ones entitled "Apples of Hesperides," "Suggested by the Cover of a Volume of Keats's Poems," "The Road to Avignon," "The Boston Athenæum." And it is equally inconceivable that Miss Lowell, who would cut

off her right hand rather than let it commit a *cliché,* could ever have written such gems of banality as:

> Life is a stream
> On which we strew
> Petal by petal the flower of our heart.

couplets as tawdry as:

> When you, my dear, are away, away,
> How wearily goes the creeping day.

or such a rubber-stamped inversion as:

> Who heard thee singing in the distance dim.

Yet these, and others, are actually on exhibit, preserved in merciless type. There are, of course, somewhat better things in the volume which contains no hint of her later *vers libre;* pieces that have allure and a lyrical flavor. "Hora Stellatrix" is a much fresher song than its Latin tag would lead one to believe, and there are the beginnings of her objective and histrionic quality in a few scattered passages. On the whole, however, it is a strangely unpromising first book.

*Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (The Macmillan Company, 1914) reveals an entirely different Amy Lowell. The book brims not only with another kind of poetry but with an unexpected belligerence. The author fights for her poems with almost superfluous zeal in a preface which argues that "the poet must learn his trade in the same manner and with the same painstaking care as the cabinet-maker," that "poetry should exist simply because it is a created beauty," that "the trees do not teach us moral lessons" and that "the poet must be constantly seeking new pictures to make his readers feel the vitality of thought." In short, "a work of beauty which cannot stand an intimate examination is a poor and jerry-

built thing." Nothing so very startling after all; nothing to bulge the eye or disturb the pulse. And yet there is something in Miss Lowell's combined invitation and challenge that makes one hurl arguments at her. One finds one's self explaining, in a much louder voice than one intended, that this prefatory explanation is a trifle gratuitous, that the theory of beauty being its own excuse for being is neither a new nor a revolutionary doctrine, and that the avoidance of old images is instinctive, that the shopworn properties of any art are and have always been intuitively shunned by the creative artist.

As to the dictum against poetry trying to teach, one might retort that poetry has taught, does teach and will continue to teach—in the work of such writers who are interested in certain beliefs and who are great enough to embody them in their writing. Teaching is a difficult and complex thing and, possibly, from a purely æsthetic angle, execrable as pure art. And yet it has been done and done beautifully—both from the standpoint of art and argument. It has been done by the anonymous poets who composed the Old Testament, by Dante when he wrote the "Divine Comedy," by Goethe when he conceived "Faust," by Francis Thompson when he wrote "The Hound of Heaven"—even by Amy Lowell in her war poems. True, "we do not ask the trees to teach us moral lessons." We do not (although a Chesterton might convince us that we should), because they have nothing to teach. Trees have this in common with poets, they both live. But one of the things that distinguish a man from a tree is that, while the tree has nothing else but life, man has life and also a theory of it. He is not only a participant but an appraiser; he has the Olympian touch. Identifying himself with the drama of life, he can at the same time sit back and view it in perspective; he is both unconscious actor and conscious critic. And so having a

criticism of existence he is, in the highest sense, a teacher. There is, of course, no reason why he should descend to plastering his art with the moral maxims employed by Miss Lowell's forbears and so dreaded by Miss Lowell. But neither is there any reason why he should not assume his natural rôle of thinker and, differing from a non-committal universe "that flings down continents and leaves them without comment," continue to be not only a decorator but, when the occasion demands, a prophet.

These prejudiced opinions are inspired not so much by Miss Lowell's art-work as by her far more dogmatic prose. When one turns from the writer of doctrinaire prefaces to Amy Lowell the writer of poetry, an entirely different personality is encountered. Many of the traits are the same—the vigor, the pugnacity, the power of the sharply cut line—but they are transmuted into something that is more delicate and yet more forceful. What is most striking in this volume is the uncommon sense of hearing a sensitive, æsthetic femininity unbosom itself in a decidedly masculine utterance. Throughout the volume one observes this queer mixture. Miss Lowell's objectivity is so great that she finds one sex insufficient to express herself. Not that she assumes the male attitude too anxiously or too often; the intellectual form of her work is hermaphroditic rather than sapphic. It assumes both sexes with equal dexterity. Contrast, for instance, so purely feminine a concept as "A Gift" with so lusty and virile a love-song as "Anticipation." Or turn from the point-lace and lavender archness of "Apology" to the brusque speech of "The Cyclists" with its speed and incision. Turn to "Vintage," "The Coal Picker," "The Foreigner," and witness the singularly masculine poise which gives even the lesser verses a strong, square-shouldered quality. These poems thrust themselves from the pages like a clenched fist.

ANTICIPATION

I have been temperate always,
But I am like to be very drunk
With your coming.
There have been times
I feared to walk down the street
Lest I should reel with the wine of you,
And jerk against my neighbours
As they go by.
I am parched now, and my tongue is horrible
in my mouth,
But my brain is noisy
With the clash and gurgle of filling wine-cups.

Here is the same quality in a more definitely pictorial piece, in which is achieved the effect of motion sought after by so many of the modern painters:

THE TAXI

When I go away from you
The world beats dead
Like a slackened drum.
I call out for you against the jutted
stars
And shout into the ridges of the wind.
Streets coming fast,
One after the other,
Wedge you away from me,
And the lamps of the city prick my eyes
So that I can no longer see your face.
Why should I leave you,
To wound myself upon the sharp edges
of the night?

This virility has many degrees. It can achieve satire as deep as the quiet but none the less powerful picture of "The Precinct, Rochester" and satire as slight as this:

EPITAPH OF A YOUNG POET WHO DIED BEFORE HAVING ACHIEVED SUCCESS

Beneath this sod lie the remains
Of one who died of growing pains.

Possibly Miss Lowell's richest possession, and one that she uses most effectively, is disclosed in these two lines—her vein of irony. We shall see, in the next volume, how she obtains some of her most dramatic effects by its aid. Here it is somewhat more whimsical, more impelled by sheer loveliness, as in "Music." Sometimes it is mixed with tragedy, as in "Clear, with Variable Winds." And sometimes it is turned to analysis, as in "Astigmatism," which is a penetrative appreciation and (despite Miss Lowell's preface) poetic criticism of Ezra Pound's art.

But it is as an experimenter that she is most arresting. Her interest in form is something like a passion with her. Yet even the most tenuous of her imagist verses have more than the form as their impetus. So with the experiments in long *vers libre* and "polyphonic prose," which Miss Lowell with eager catholicity has adopted from the French. The latter form, as she uses it, becomes a flexible medium with its prose structure, its irregular meter, its sudden incidental and almost accidental rhymes. Here is a part of one of the more dramatic employments of this method:

THE FORSAKEN

Holy Mother of God, Merciful Mary. Hear me! I am very weary. I have come from a village miles away, all day I have been coming, and I ache for such far roaming. I cannot walk as light as I used, and my thoughts grow confused. I am heavier than I was. Mary Mother, you know the cause!

Beautiful Holy Lady, take my shame away from me! Let this fear be only seeming, let it be that I am dreaming. For months I have hoped it was so, now I am afraid I know.

Lady, why should this be shame, just because I haven't got his name. He loved me, yes Lady, he did, and he couldn't keep it hid. We meant to marry. Why did he die?

That day when they told me he had gone down in the avalanche, and could not be found until the snow melted in Spring, I did nothing. I could not cry. Why should he die? Why should he die and his child live? His little child alive in me, for my comfort. No, Good God, for my misery! I cannot face the shame, to be a mother, and not married, and the poor child to be reviled for having no father. Merciful Mother, Holy Virgin, take away this sin I did. Let the baby not be. Only take the stigma off of me!

The other poems in this elastic manner are more technically skillful, but they are almost too theatrical in speech and effect. So, too, are many of the rhymed narratives, particularly the long phantasmagoria of "The Great Adventure of Max Breuck" and the shorter and almost hysterical "After Hearing a Waltz by Bartok." The tendency to theatricalize a theme, to throw in a fire, a murder, a suicide, frequently distorts what sprang from a less "effective" but far more effectual emotion.

But the genuine freshness of her mood is, as a rule, expressed in the ingenious freshness of her style. As a final example of this provocative volume, I quote this memorable Dresden-china portrait:

A LADY

You are beautiful and faded
Like an old opera tune
Played upon a harpsichord;
Or like the sun-flooded silks
Of an eighteenth-century boudoir.

In your eyes
Smoulder the fallen roses of outlived
minutes,

And the perfume of your soul
Is vague and suffusing,
With the pungence of sealed spice-
jars.
Your half-tones delight me,
And I grow mad with gazing
At your blent colours.

My vigour is a new-minted penny,
Which I cast at your feet.
Gather it up from the dust,
That its sparkle may amuse you.

With her next book, *Men, Women and Ghosts* (The Macmillan Company, 1916), Miss Lowell fulfilled the hopes of her friends. Her antagonists found little comfort in the new volume, for its author escaped from their dark pigeonholes, shook off the neat labels with which they had ticketed her, and proceeded to do all the things which they had proved she was incapable of doing. They said she could not tell a direct, readable story; and *Men, Women and Ghosts* is a bookful of them. They said she could write only in irregular rhythms and bizarre images; so she gives them a 627-line eighteenth century love-poem, with all the conservative modelling and precision of Pope. They said she was at home only in the limbo of foreign futurism; and here (in "The Overgrown Pasture") are four straightforward, almost over-dramatic poems of everyday New England.

One of the most remarkable things about this volume is its extraordinary range of subjects, treatment and forms. Chaucerian stanzas, "unrelated" *vers libre,* strict ballad measures, polyphonic prose, conservative couplets, free-rhymed verse, monologues in dialect, stiff little tercets—in her handling of these Miss Lowell reveals her skill as the most versatile woman that has ever written poetry in

AMY LOWELL

From a photograph
by Bachrach

America. Perhaps, after all, the most amazing thing is neither the amount of topics nor the variety of forms that interest her, but the astonishing success with which they are employed. Restless, penetrative, alert, Miss Lowell's reactions are a fresh surprise to the reader and an impetus to the artist.

Turn to the first section in the new volume. These six "Figurines in Old Saxe" are as artfully fashioned as the fine china that they are supposed to represent; yet the figures are none the less real for being manufactured. The emotions, as in most of Miss Lowell's work, are studied and intellectualized, but somehow they escape being only artifice. She speaks rarely of herself, but outside of herself; and, being a skilfully objective artist, she plays every rôle with as much gusto as if it were her natural part. Sometimes the illusion of reality is startling. It intensifies "Patterns," with its fierce war of restraint and passion set against an eighteenth century background; one is startled to see how thoroughly the poet has identified herself with the woman who carried herself rigid to the pattern, but cried out at the end:

> In Summer and in Winter I shall walk
> Up and down
> The patterned garden-paths
> In my stiff, brocaded gown.
> The squills and daffodils
> Will give place to pillared roses, and to
> asters, and to snow.
> I shall go
> Up and down
> In my gown.
> Gorgeously arrayed,
> Boned and stayed.
> And the softness of my body will be
> guarded from embrace
> By each button, hook, and lace.

> For the man who should loose me is dead,
> Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,
> In a pattern called a war.
> Christ! What are patterns for?

For an even subtler substitution, observe "The Cremona Violin," with its deft use of the Chaucerian verse structure threaded with the flowing line of modern *vers libre* to simulate the undulating rhythm of the violin. Or, for a further proof that Miss Lowell can be most convincing when she is least obviously herself, turn from the strict stanzas of "Pickthorn Manor" to the uncanny suggestion and ghostly force of "The Cross Roads." Or study what evidently is Miss Lowell's favorite section, "Bronze Tablets," where this frequently agnostic poet may be caught almost in an attitude of hero-worship. Here, through the medium of four poems and a dozen characters, we have a series of side-lights on the last phase of Napoleon, side-lights that are as unusual as they are illuminating. Aside from its metrical excellence, this set rises to an eloquence and force that none of her previous work achieved. The first of this series, "The Fruit Shop," sets the mental as well as the physical scene for the Napoleonic *tableaux;* "Malmaison" achieves both poignance and that mordant irony which was more than suggested in the previous volume, and in "The Hammers" the series (as well as the book) reaches its dramatic and artistic climax. It is a genuinely thrilling piece of work; the skill with which it is divided into different moods with their verbal *leitmotifs* is something more than a technical triumph. The way the various kinds of hammers are characterized and made dominant—their music changing from the ponderous banging at the building of the "Bellerophon" to the light tapping as the letters that spell Napoleon's victories are picked off the arch in the *Place du*

*Carrousel,* to the final hammers drumming on the coffin at St. Helena—the art and emphasis with which they reveal a period—these are things rare even in the best of contemporary art. No one but Masefield can surpass Miss Lowell when she is telling a narrative.

In this volume, I have said, Miss Lowell's finest quality—her probing irony—reaches its fullest expression. It animates the picture in "1777" where, in a brief glimpse of America and Venice, she contrasts the birth of a new nation with the death of an old one. It turns "Off the Turnpike" into a grotesque reflection of the insanity that broods over lonely farms. It shines most brilliantly when it achieves so direct an expression of itself as in "The Dinner Party."

Less successful are the post-impressionist records of city scenes. "Red Slippers" does, indeed, achieve the effect of prismatic rays of crimson split into a thousand scintillations. But the rest of the "Towns in Color" (an attempt to see the city not as a market or a medley of people but as a composition, an aural painting that takes sensations and sounds and breaks them into dominant lines and shades) furnishes little more than an intellectual concept. Like the "Three Pieces for String Quartet," where Miss Lowell takes Stravinsky's musical joke in literal earnest, we have a glimpse here of the experimenter beginning to flounder, of the intellectual swimmer becoming theory-logged. The poet, beyond her depth, strikes for solider ground and the poem sinks in a welter of verbiage.

These moments are fortunately rare. And they are still rarer in *Can Grande's Castle* (The Macmillan Company, 1918), in which the teller of stories, the artist and the experimenter are fused. Possibly the strangest thing about this energetic book is that it is actually taken from other books. Even the title is borrowed. And yet the use of another poet's phrase explains not only itself, but the volume

it prefaces. In Richard Aldington's "At the British Museum" are these lines:

> I turn the page and read .
>
> The heavy air, the black desks,
> The bent heads and the rustling noises
> In the great dome
> Vanish. . . .
> And
> The sun hangs in the cobalt-blue sky,
> The boat drifts over the lake shallows,
> The fishes skim like umber shades through the
> undulating weeds,
> The oleanders drop their rosy petals on the lawns,
> And the swallows dive and swirl and whistle
> About the cleft battlements of Can Grande's Castle.

By using Aldington's phrase as her title, Miss Lowell lets us understand that the contents of the new volume are the result of what she has read. But in the writing, her reading becomes real; her creative excitement makes what she has got from pages of history-books far livelier than her life. It is obvious that she could not possibly have experienced these things. Their vividness is due to the fact that, thrown back into the past, either by the war (as Miss Lowell claims), or, as is more probable, by a subconscious search for fresh material, an artist has taken a list of dates, battles, proper names together with Rand McNally's Geography and vitalized them. It is this objective and dramatic sense that makes her audience feel the reality of her historical revaluations just as it makes Miss Lowell declare, "Living now in the midst of events greater than these, the stories I have dug out of dusty volumes seem as actual as my own existence."

The volume is composed of four long semi-declamatory, semi-narrative poems, all of them in "polyphonic prose,"

with which John Gould Fletcher has experimented so often. Concerning this form, Miss Lowell has an extremely interesting digression in her preface. A glance at her poems in this manner shows not only how far she has gone from the original innovation of Paul Fort (which consisted, for the greater part, of regular prose passages alternating with regular rhymed ones) but how greatly she has progressed beyond her own previous efforts in this mode. With its many changes of rhythm and subtleties of rhyme, it is practically a new form; dignified, orchestral, fluid. It is a form of almost infinite possibilities; it can run the gamut of *tempi* and dynamics on one page; it can combine the thunder of great oratory with the roll of blank verse and the low flutes of a lyric. If Miss Lowell has done nothing else, she has enriched English as well as American literature with a new and variable medium of expression.

The poems in *Can Grande's Castle* are only four in number, but two of them represent the best that Miss Lowell has given us. "Hedge Island," the least important of the quartet, is a resetting of the coaching period in England. "Sea-Blue and Blood-Red" is a picturesque, accurate, sometimes too prolix re-telling (especially in the details) of Lord Nelson's great battles. But the other two touch magnificence. "The Bronze Horses" has a larger sweep than Miss Lowell has ever attempted; here she achieves a sense of magnitude and time that is amazing. From the period when the bronze horses witness the return of the efficient Romans under Titus from their eminence on the Arch of Nero, to the day when the airships attack Venice and they are taken down from the portico of Saint Mark's to be sent for safety to Rome, one feels the slow circling of years. Not in all contemporary poetry has the quality of balance and return been so beautifully illustrated. And its intellectual content is scarcely less striking, even though Miss Lowell falls into a

common error by suggesting that Nietzsche was not only greatly responsible for the world war but was a strong advocate of its *"schrecklichkeit."*

Yet splendid as "The Bronze Horses" is, it is surpassed by the sheer power of "Guns as Keys: And the Great Gate Swings," the high-water mark of the volume. In this poem Miss Lowell has combined "polyphonic prose" at its best with unrhymed *vers libre* so skilfully that the most skeptical conservative must see how easily this form lends itself to new and unsuspected musical variations. See, for instance, the way in which this free recital of Commodore Perry's visit to Japan is varied, broken up by snatches of rude chanties and inserts of exotic details as delicate as the prints of Hokusai. The opening indicates the method:

"Due East, far West. Distant as the nests of the opposite winds. Removed as fire and water are, as the clouds and the roots of the hills, as the wills of youth and age. Let the key-guns be mounted, make a brave show of waging war, and pry off the lid of Pandora's box once more. Get in at any cost and let out a little, so it seems; but wait—wait—there is much to follow through the Great Gate!

"They do not see things in quite that way, on this bright November day, with sun flashing, and waves splashing, up and down Chesapeake Bay. On shore, all the papers are running to press with huge headlines: 'Commodore Perry Sails!' Dining-tables buzz with travelers' tales of old Japan culled from Dutch writers. But we are not like the Dutch. No shutting the stars and stripes up on an island. Pooh! We must trade wherever we have a mind. Naturally!

"The wharves of Norfolk are falling behind, becoming smaller, confused with the warehouses and the trees. On the impetus of the strong South breeze, the paddle-wheel steam frigate *Mississippi* of the United States Navy sails down the flashing bay. Sails away, and steams away, for her furnaces are burning, and her paddle-wheels turning, and all her sails are set and full. Pull, men, to the old chorus:

"A Yankee ship sails down the river,
Blow, boys, blow;
Her masts and spars they shine like silver,
Blow, my bully boys, blow."

. . . . . .

At Mishima in the Province of Kai,
Three men are trying to measure a pine tree
By the length of their outstretched arms.
Trying to span the bole of a huge pine tree
By the spread of their lifted arms.
Attempting to compress its girth
Within the limit of their extended arms.
Beyond, Fuji,
Majestic, inevitable,
Wreathed over by wisps of cloud.
The clouds draw about the mountain,
And there are gaps.
The men reach about the pine tree,
But their hands break apart;
The rough bark escapes their hand-clasps;
The tree is unencircled.
Three men are trying to measure the stem
of a gigantic pine tree,
With their arms,
At Mishima in the Province of Kai.

*Pictures of the Floating World* (The Macmillan Company, 1919) may well come to be Miss Lowell's most popular book. It retains her vigor with an increase in delicacy. There is a smashing irony beneath the smooth contours of "On a Certain Critic," "William Blake," and "Ely Cathedral" that is aimed, one suspects, directly at certain critical opponents. She is, however, not always an adroit protagonist. In an effort to live up to and exceed her "radical" tendencies, she overreaches herself, betrays her admirers and plays traitor to her own art. Such a piece as "Gargoyles" will not only give aid and comfort to the enemy, but will lay Miss Lowell open to the more grievous crime of taking a

page from "Others" and more than a few paragraphs from the classic "Tender Buttons" of Gertrude Stein. This is a fragment from it:

> Tree lights
> Drip cockatoos of colour
> On broadest shoulders,
> Dead eyes swim to a silver fish.
> Gluttonous hands tear at apron strings,
> Reach at the red side of an apple,
> Slide under ice-floes,
> And waltz clear through to the tropics
> To sit among cocoanuts
> And caress bulbous negresses with loquats
> in their hair.

But these burlesque excursions into the bizarre are infrequent; a few of them seem to satisfy Miss Lowell's varietistic curiosity. She treads lightly through the East of "Lacquer Prints" with precise and distinguished steps; she even ventures a tentative toe in Heine's moon-haunted, nightingale-enchanted land. And in "Two Speak Together" and "Eyes and Ears and Walking" she is on her own solid ground. The images in these sections rank with the finest examples of this almost too-versatile poet. There is a riot of fancy here, a confused luxuriance as rich and tropical as the garden which seems to be the center of Miss Lowell's inspiration. The colors with which her lines are studded are like bits of bright enamel; every leaf and flower has a lacquered brilliance. It is obvious that Miss Lowell agitates whatever she touches; under her provocative observation not even the most static thing can remain quiescent. Whether she writes about a fruit shop, a bather, a violin sonata, dolphins in blue water, a broken fountain or a Japanese print, everything flashes, leaps, spins and burns with an almost savage intensity. And, though motion frequently

usurps the place of emotion, the speed is not without its graces and changes in tempo.

Although *Pictures of the Floating World* contains some of Miss Lowell's most aggressively brilliant examples, it also includes many of her quieter successes. "Madonna of the Evening Flowers" is one of the poems that combine magic of verbal and color sensitivity. Only the stern limitations of space prevent me from quoting such bits of illumination as "Ombre Chinoise," "The Charm," "Solitaire" (a snatch of autobiography), "Orange of Midsummer," "Grotesque," "The Corner of Night and Morning" and a half dozen others. Here is one of the briefest though not the least brilliant of them:

OPAL

You are ice and fire,
The touch of you burns my hands like snow.
You are cold and flame.
You are the crimson of amaryllis,
The silver of moon-touched magnolias.
When I am with you,
My heart is a frozen pond
Gleaming with agitated torches.

And here is another less imagistic but even more penetrating impression, a resigned love song:

A DECADE

When you came, you were like red wine and honey,
And the taste of you burnt my mouth with its sweetness.
Now you are like morning bread,
Smooth and pleasant.
I hardly taste you at all for I know your savour,
But I am completely nourished.

The opening section of this volume is less original and yet, in spite of certain obvious echoes like "Peace" (where

the butterfly sleeping on the temple bell—a picture of silence —is made to perch on the muzzle of a cannon), Miss Lowell has added a turn that is definitely her own.

EPHEMERA

Silver-green lanterns tossing among windy
branches:
So an old man thinks
Of the loves of his youth.

PROPORTION

In the sky there is a moon and stars;
And in my garden there are yellow moths
Fluttering about a white azalea bush.

These imitations of Japanese *hokku* serve as an excellent introduction to *Fir-Flower Tablets* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921). In this volume, Miss Lowell has made flexible English versions of almost one hundred and fifty poems which her collaborator, Florence Ayscough, has translated from the Chinese. Apart from the value and clarity of the verses themselves, the collection is notable for Miss Ayscough's illuminating introduction and the equally revealing notes. This generous compilation deserves a place on the same shelf with Arthur Waley's "A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems" and the Asiatic love poems rendered by E. Powys Mathers.

*Legends* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921) is closely related to *Can Grande's Castle*. "A legend," says Miss Lowell, "is something which nobody has written and everybody has written, and which anybody is at liberty to rewrite." And here, in these varied pages, are eleven stories from seven different backgrounds. Lacking the sweep of the four earlier canvases, the new narratives are chiefly interesting as stories. The first poem, however, "Memoran-

dum Confided by a Yucca to a Passion-Vine," must be rated among the poet's finest moments; it is a startling *tour de force,* shining with colors strange even for Miss Lowell, exotic and metallic as the scene it describes. As in her previous books, this poet makes even the most casual descriptions an adventure in excitement.

It would be doing scant justice to Miss Lowell to conclude this chapter without an appreciative line regarding her recent work in the formal measures. Her touch has grown lighter and surer without sacrificing the accent which is definitely hers. These skilfully constructed rhymes (suggesting the *milieu* of the earlier "Patterns") are fresh evidence of her continual development.

NUIT BLANCHE

I want no horns to rouse me up to-night,
And trumpets make too clamorous a ring
To fit my mood, it is so weary white
I have no wish for doing anything.

A music coaxed from humming strings would please;
Not plucked, but drawn in creeping cadences
Across a sunset wall where some Marquise
Picks a pale rose amid strange silences.

Ghostly and vaporous her gown sweeps by
The twilight dusking wall, I hear her feet
Delaying on the gravel, and a sigh,
Briefly permitted, touches the air like sleet.

And it is dark, I hear her feet no more.
A red moon leers beyond the lily-tank.
A drunken moon ogling a sycamore,
Running long fingers down its shining flank.

A lurching moon, as nimble as a clown,
Cuddling the flowers and trees which burn like glass.
Red, kissing lips, I feel you on my gown—
Kiss me, red lips, and then pass—pass.

Music, you are pitiless to-night.
And I so old, so cold, so languorously white.

A consideration of her volumes must make it plain that Miss Lowell's range is the most obvious of her gifts. But it is not the greatest. She strikes single notes as sharply as she sounds experimental chords. When her completed works are some day appraised in a detailed study of American poetry, it will be found that her versatile energies have expressed a poet who is half-singer, half-scientist, and the groping, experimental period she helped represent.

# EZRA POUND

No living American poet started his career with a more vigorous determination than Ezra Pound. He began by blazing his own path through a trampled poetic forest. Soon he started wandering whenever he saw a by-road, followed every curious turn, pursued the will-o'-the-wisps of the bizarre, and finally lost himself in the backwoods and marshes of literature. Equipped with an unusual vigor and a freshness of personality, he made his early work singularly his own; he did something to words and accents that, even though it speedily degenerated into a tight mannerism, was an extraordinary impetus to a small regiment of writers. He was one of the most pitiless antagonists of the mawkish and treacle-dripping verse that was being manufactured and retailed under the gaudy label of poetry. He spurned dullness in whatever form he encountered it; it was under his leadership that the Imagists became not only a group but a fighting protest. Deserted by his disciples, left alone now on his lonely and not too lofty eminence, descending at times to conduct a brief guerilla warfare, he presents a picture not without its poignance—the spectacle of the prophet, scorning honor in his own country, living abroad and (having failed to find glory there) sending back barbed reminders of his existence to the land he has rejected.

No one can blame a poet for changing his residence. And it is scarcely fair to argue, as has been attempted, that England changed the eager, experimental boy into a cynical litterateur. One may become as completely immersed in the pedantry of culture in the Philadelphia which Pound left as

in the Bohemia of London which he now inhabits. There was undoubtedly something of the scholiast and a little of the antiquarian in his nonage; even his first book, for all its intensity, throbs with a passion that is, at bottom, a literary passion.

*Provença,* published in 1911 by Small, Maynard & Company, is an American edition that contains practically all of the three slim volumes that were brought out by Elkin Mathews under the intriguing titles *Personae, Exultations* and *Canzoniere.* It is a remarkably interesting, contradictory and irritating book. It is free in feeling and confined in expression; it is by turns highly individual and strongly derivative, carelessly sincere and studiously poised. It is not that Pound devotes his energy to the resuscitation of a long-dead past; his failure lies in the fact that, for all his spells and incantations, he never really resurrects it. Out of the pages of *Provença* come the easily recognizable voices of Browning, Villon and the less familiar accents of the Provençal singers. Even when he is not consciously imitating Bertran de Born, Arnault Daniel and Jaufré Rudel Pound's poetry often seems a worn echo of theirs. The influence of Browning is particularly strong, even in the adaptations from the *jongleurs;* witness, for example, the self-satiric "Famam Librosque Cano" and "Marvoil" which fall into the identical idiom that is so typical of "Sordello":

> "A poor clerk I, 'Arnault the less' they call me,
> And because I have small mind to sit
> Day long, long day cooped on a stool
> A-jumbling o' figures for Maitre Jacques Polin,
> I ha' taken to rambling the South here."

But when Pound lays aside the half-ruminating, half-narrative manner of Browning, when he is less concerned with the ballata, the canzon and the planh of the troubadours,

he discloses a more arresting and far more powerful figure. Here he achieves a half-defiant, half-disdainful independence. Even though the overtones of other singers are still in the air, one can hear Pound's own voice rising with a grave fierceness in poems like "Revolt," "Histrion," "Praise of Ysolt" and the stark

BALLAD FOR GLOOM

For God, our God, is a gallant foe
That playeth behind the veil.

I have loved my God as a child at heart
That seeketh deep bosoms for rest,
I have loved my God as maid to man
But lo, this thing is best:

To love your God as a gallant foe
    that plays behind the veil,
To meet your God as the night winds
    meet beyond Arcturus' pale.

I have played with God for a woman,
I have staked with my God for truth,
I have lost to my God as a man, clear eyed,
    His dice be not of ruth.

For I am made as a naked blade,
But hear ye this thing in sooth:

Who loseth to God as man to man
Shall win at the turn of the game.
I have drawn my blade where the
    lightnings meet
But the ending is the same:
Who loseth to God as the sword blades lose
Shall win at the end of the game.

For God, our God, is a gallant foe
    that playeth behind the veil,
Whom God deigns not to overthrow
    Hath need of triple mail.

Still finer is the quiet intensity of the "Idyl for Glaucus," the brusque vigor of "Pierre Vidal Old," "Sestina: Altaforte," the unsentimental tenderness of such a brief moment as

PICCADILLY

Beautiful, tragical faces,
Ye that were whole, and are so sunken;
And, O ye vile, ye that might have been loved,
That are so sodden and drunken,
Who hath forgotten you?

O wistful, fragile faces, few out of many!

The gross, the coarse, the brazen,
God knows I cannot pity them, perhaps, as
I should do,
But, oh, ye delicate, wistful faces,
Who hath forgotten you?

It is such writing that stood out from much that was superficial and more that was artificial. In the midst of borrowings and experiments in form, one came suddenly upon lines so passionate and imagination so exuberant that they seemed to possess an almost physical force. Here is a part of another distinctive example:

BALLAD OF THE GOODLY FERE

Ha' we lost the goodliest fere o' all
For the priests and the gallows tree?
Aye lover he was of brawny men,
O' ships and the open sea.

When they came wi' a host to take Our Man
His smile was good to see,
"First let these go!" quo' our Goodly Fere,
"Or I'll see ye damned," says he.

Courtesy of Messrs. Boni and Liveright

EZRA POUND

Aye he sent us out through the crossed high
spears
And the scorn of his laugh rang free,
"Why took ye not me when I walked about
Alone in the town?" says he.

Oh we drank his "Hale" in the good red wine
When we last made company,
No capon priest was the Goodly Fere
But a man o' men was he.

The rich simplicity of this "Greek Epigram" is equally memorable though couched in a less individual rhetoric:

Day and night are never weary,
Nor yet is God of creating
For day and night their torch-bearers,
The aube and the crepuscule.

So, when I weary of praising the dawn and the
sunset,
Let me be no more counted among the immortals;
But number me amid the wearying ones,
Let me be a man as the herd,
And as the slave that is given in barter.

Here we have, in nine eloquent lines, Pound *in petto*—his power and his limitation. He is a modernist using his instrument as if it were the tool of an archæologist; a poet expressing himself in terms of the pedant. One thinks, as one turns to his next book, of the challenging sentences from his "Revolt":

Great God, grant life in dreams—
Not dalliance, but life!
Let us be men that dream—
Not cowards, dabblers, waiters
For dead Time to re-awaken . . .

One thinks of these lines—and turns (passing the scholarly but stilted translations of *The Sonnets and Ballate of*

*Guido Cavalcanti*) to *Lustra* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1917). The range and variety of this collection are its most outstanding qualities and its chief defects. *Lustra* seems a catch-all for Pound's slightest gibes and gesticulations. Together with some obviously notable work, there are brittle fragments in the imagist manner, lugubrious cantos in a kind of Sordello form, arrangements in the vorticist vein, epigrams from the Greek, Lalage and other ladies from the Latin, paraphrases from the German, scraps from the early Anglo-Saxon, snatches of Spanish, idioms from the Italian, water-colors from the Chinese, faint echoes from old Provence—one gets nothing so much as a confused jumble and smattering of erudition. All Pound has read of what's abroad is carefully noted, collected, tagged and set down. Nothing is too inconsequential or unworthy for preservation. It is all here; even the absurd apostrophe to Swinburne ("Salve Pontifex"), the heavy attempt at humor in "Les Millwin," the cheap jest of "Our Contemporaries" and the schoolboy burlesque of "Summer is icummen in." What makes this lust for print the more puzzling is the fact that Pound still possesses a selective as well as a critical gift. In fact, the concentrative faculty (as is proved by his transcriptions in the section "Cathay," a series of poems skilfully arranged from Fenollosa's notes) is his most salient trait. What then can even the most enthusiastic of his quondam admirers say to the awkward and malformed versions of the eight Heine poems that read like so many witless parodies, the silliness of such a couplet as:

THE NEW CAKE OF SOAP

Lo, how it glistens in the sun
Like the cheek of a Chesterton.

or "Papyrus" which I quote in its cryptic entirety:

PAPYRUS

Spring . . .
Too long . . .
Gongula . . .

This overmastering desire to exhibit every triviality, to sacrifice no bit of table-talk, to let not one bad joke blush unseen, spoils many a bright page and most of the volume, just as it ruined his book of prose, *Pavannes and Divisions* (Knopf, 1918). All the petty irritations, the scrapped experiments, the amiable heresies are here for the edification of the cognoscenti. Pound chatters on, and his wandering loquacity makes one forget that this poet actually achieves some amazing effects both as a colorist and an ironist. In the midst of filings and tailings from the craftsman's workshop, one can find, with diligence and patience, such sharp performances as "Phasellus Illes," "New York," "Arides," "The Social Order," "Ripostes" and the "Portrait D'Une Femme," which has more than its title in common with T. S. Eliot's "Portrait of A Lady."

PORTRAIT D'UNE FEMME

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years
And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.
Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.
You have been second always. Tragical?
No. You preferred it to the usual thing:
One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
One average mind—with one thought less, each year.
Oh, you are patient, I have seen you sit
Hours, where something might have floated up.
And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
You are a person of some interest, one comes to you

And takes strange gain away:
Trophies fished up, some curious suggestion:
Fact that leads nowhere; and a tale for two,
Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
That might prove useful and yet never proves,
That never fits a corner or shows use,
Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:
The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work;
Idols and ambergris and rare inlays.
These are your riches, your great store; and yet
For all this sea-hoard of deciduous things,
Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:
In the slow float of differing light and deep,
No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
Nothing that's quite your own.
Yet this is you.

It is interesting also to observe how cold irony gives way to hot anger in "The Rest," "Salutation" and "Commission." I quote the first few lines of the last:

Go, my songs, to the lonely and the unsatisfied,
Go also to the nerve-wracked, go to the enslaved-by-convention,
Bear to them my contempt for their oppressors.
Go as a great wave of cool water,
Bear my contempt of oppressors.

Speak against unconscious oppression,
Speak against the tyranny of the unimaginative,
Speak against bonds.

Go to the bourgeoise who is dying of her ennuis,
Go to the women in suburbs.
Go to the hideously wedded,
Go to them whose failure is concealed,
Go to the unluckily mated,
Go to the bought wife,
Go to the woman entailed.

All this challenging invocation would be much more im-

pressive if Pound's songs really did go! But if there is anything they do not do, they do not

> Go to the bourgeoise . . .

Nor do they

> Go in a friendly manner,
> Go with an open speech.

In fact, they do not go at all, but remain for the delight of the delicately attuned, the nuance-worshipers. It is a false erudition that has misled Pound; he mistakes "the flicker for the flame." He is, in spite of his declared interest in oppressors and women in suburbs, scarcely concerned with anything so common. But his æsthetic preoccupations have had some delicate results. Any lover of things exquisitely made will find much to admire in the subtleties of light, shadow, movement and what is naïvely called "atmosphere" in such brief pictures as "Albatre," "Gentildonna," "Fish," "The Encounter," the "Fan-Piece for Her Imperial Lord," a splendid piece of condensation from an original many times as long (compare it with the careful version in Herbert Giles's *A History of Chinese Literature*), "The Coming of War," this beautifully fashioned

ΔΩΡΙΑ

> Be in me as the eternal moods
> of the bleak wind, and not
> As transient things are—
> gaiety of flowers.
> Have in me in the strong loneliness
> of sunless cliffs
> And of grey waters.
> Let the gods speak softly of us
> In days hereafter,
> The shadowy flowers of Orcus
> Remember Thee.

or this brief and brilliant flash:

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Throughout the volume one senses, even in the best of his technical pieces, that decadence which appraises the values in life chiefly as æsthetic values. And this decadence expresses itself in a literary sophistication, a weariness, an imaginative sterility. It affects Pound not only as a recorder of emotions but as a once richly creative artist. An article in *The New Republic* has put the matter pointedly. Following the line of reasoning that in Pound's new work the native heat is lacking and that his art has come back upon itself, it declares: "For atrophy of the æsthetic values is bound to follow the loss or stunting by an artist of other values. The truth is that neither can with impunity be immured or aggrandized at the expense of the other. It is the same whether the world or an artist make the attempt. Life is impoverished, and with life, art. So the world has grown smaller for Pound. He questions, he feels, less. Therefore song does not come. . . . He does, instead, the stock French thing of chinoiseries, vignettes, etc., which seem new, only because Anglo-Saxons generally know so little of French literature. When content has become for an artist merely something to inflate and display form with, then the petty serves as well as the great, the ignoble equally with the lofty, the unlovely like the beautiful, the sordid as the clean. For the purpose anything does. Values become lost or blurred and all things are regarded as intrinsically equal. Real feeling consequently becomes rarer, and the artist descends to trivialities of observation, vagaries of assertion, or mere *bravado* of standards and expression—pure tilting at convention."

In *Poems,* 1918-1922 (Boni and Liveright, 1922) we

have the same incongruity of selection (or lack of it) that amazes one in *Lustra.* Here again are Pound's valuable excursions and his false alarums. Here again is his antagonism to the crowd, that unconcealed disgust of Demos (half contempt, half fear) which makes him assume the air of a disgruntled patrician finding himself in a savagely modern world; he speaks more and more like a troubled anachronism. This dissatisfaction with his age and his inability to command its attention account for most of Pound's splenetic outbursts. The nimble arrogance of Whistler has been a bad example for him. For where Whistler carried off his impertinences with a light and dazzling dexterity, Pound, a far heavier-handed controversialist, begins by being truculent and ends by being tiresome. The reckless poet develops into the querulous *prosateur,* he becomes the scholiast gone to seed. The "Cantos", those rag-bags of memories crammed with literary flotsam and jetsam, are as unintelligible as ever. Certain of the metrical experiments should interest any craftsman and a few poems have a more general appeal. "Mauberley," with its note of latter-day disillusion, is one of these. Here are some of its dry and bitter stanzas:

*The tea-rose, tea-gown, etc.*
*Supplants the mousseline of Cos,*
*The Pianola replaces*
*Sappho's barbitos.*

*Christ follows Dionysus,*
*Phallic and ambrosial*
*Made way for macerations,*
*Caliban casts out Ariel.*

*All things are a flowing,*
*Sage Heracleitus says:*
*But a tawdry cheapness*
*Shall outlast our days.*

*Paun's flesh is not for us,*
*Nor the saint's vision;*
*We have the press for wafer,*
*Franchise for circumcision.*

And so, despite the moments of rebellion, Pound's work is the record of a retreat, a gradual withdrawal from life. His early invocation praying for

Not dalliance, but life!
Let us be men that dream—
Not cowards, dabblers, waiters
For dead Time to re-awaken

—this has a mocking and rather pathetic sound after reading Pound's later books. He has, in spite of his sporadic excursions in the revolutionary, become just this—a dabbler, dallying with dreams, "a waiter for dead Time to re-awaken." He has developed into a connoisseur of the curious; a formalist arguing in a musty and deserted class-room. It is not life he seeks but the library; and there he has locked himself in. Once in a while he opens a window and hears people laughing and brawling in the street. But he listens only for a moment. The window is slammed, the curtains are drawn, the midnight oil is lit—and he is back again, picking his way through literatures, amassing technicalities, and dreaming of himself in his favorite rôle: the aristogogue in power, the *precieux* regnant.

And yet, apart from his definite and invaluable influence as critic, there is a firm distinction in Pound's work. His painstaking study in collecting literatures has yielded him an accent, an attitude. He maintains a certain grace of bearing, even when he poses before the mirror of his art, draped in a coat of many cultures that he has constructed, patch by patch, from other and more original designers. He has really little to say, but he says that little in a manner

that gives his words the tone of authority. It is not so much the phrases as his gestures that are distinguished and arresting. It is the wave of the hand that explains and identifies Pound. Some of his followers (though they would be the last to admit his influence) have surpassed him in his own *métiers:* "H. D." and Richard Aldington are far more genuinely Hellenic and chiseled than he; T. S. Eliot has a much lighter touch in recording the ironies and overtones of conversation; John Gould Fletcher is a more daring experimenter in the clash of colors; Maxwell Bodenheim has a more fantastic imagination. But Pound triumphs in the gesture. He raises his arm, his fingers become nimble, his eyebrows go up—and what, when spoken, is trivial, becomes glamorous with a suggestion of mystery. This is his power. The effect is that of a verbal legerdemain; the speech is mostly dumb-show, but he still simulates the magic of life. He is like Gordon Craig's super-marionette, and his art is poetry in pantomime.

# CONRAD AIKEN

THE position of Conrad Aiken is one of the paradoxes of contemporary American letters. Aiken has already produced nine volumes of poetry and one book of provocative criticism; he is one of the finest verbal musicians in this country; his work is rich in color and incident, thoughtful without losing itself in the jungles of the mind, distinguished without being flagrantly bizarre. What, then, is the reason for Aiken's unpopularity? The easiest answer, and one that solves more than half of the puzzle, is the air of futility that rises from his pages. Sometimes querulous, more often resigned, this weariness finds one gradation after another, sinking through gray or faintly luminous clouds to a negation that records itself in Aiken's very titles: *Nocturne of Remembered Spring, The Charnel Rose, The House of Dust.* Even his book of critical essays frightened off a yea-loving public by calling itself *Scepticisms.*

Aiken's first book, *Earth Triumphant and Other Tales in Verse* (The Macmillan Company, 1914), is characteristic of Aiken only insofar as his early habit of borrowing from his contemporaries is characteristic of him. In *Earth Triumphant,* he leans so heavily upon Masefield's strength that it becomes his weakness; the indebtedness is crippling and pitiful. Entire poems ("Romance," "Youth," the title-poem and others) proceed not only with the Englishman's idiom but with his identical mechanics. An example:

> He drank, he cursed, he flung the world off spinning,
> He fought three times, a girl the cause each time;
> He broke Jake Granz's jaw to stop him grinning,

Whirled stars about his head and made them chime;
He got in with a gang whose work was crime,
Helped crack a jewelry store, then half killed one
Who called him cheat at cards, and pulled a gun . . .

At the stage doors he met with murmured curses,
He waltzed the queens away, he had his will;
He laughed to see the sports look black as hearses,
White blooded things! Did they have hands to kill?
Touch of soft fingers on him made him thrill,
He strode, his nostrils quivered stiff with scorn,
He wondered why these little men were born. . . . .

The stories themselves are incredibly sentimental. "Romance" is an account of a Fall River Line *amour* that might have been written jointly by Laura Jean Libbey and Robert W. Service; "Youth" is the tale of a bruiser-Don Juan who leaves the harlot city and, after sixty pages, is regenerated by a country girl in a white dress!

There are times when the verse sinks to bathos unintentionally humorous.

He looked on meretricious clothing
And straightway he was sick with loathing;
And while his friends perspired with bliss,
At thinking of a chorine's kiss,
Lo, beauty like a lightning came
To strike this ugliness with flame. . . .

There is even a descent to philosophizing as flat as:

The man, he mused, who once knows love
No baser lust can ever move.

Something of Aiken comes through in his next volume, *Turns and Movies* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916). The old influence is almost gone, although a new one dominates the first part of the volume. Masefield is exchanged for Masters—or his ghost. It is a hectic and unreal world that Aiken is trying to picture; and no one seems less

equipped to present a Spoon River Anthology of the vaudeville stage than the detached Aiken, viewing his characters from the balcony of his ivory tower.

The less conspicuous half of the book is made of entirely different material, used far more skillfully. The musician announces himself though he has not quite emerged. "Evensong" has a beautiful if tired movement; "Discordants" has three delicate lyrics, one of which, while graceful in rhythm, has been so much quoted that it threatens to be Aiken's Melody in F!

> Music I heard with you was more than music,
> And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
> Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
> All that was once so beautiful is dead.
>
> Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
> And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
> These things do not remember you, belovèd,—
> And yet your touch upon them will not pass.
>
> For it was in my heart you moved among them,
> And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
> And in my heart they will remember always,—
> They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

*The Jig of Forslin* (The Four Seas Company, 1916), as Aiken explains, is based on the Freudian psychology, the theme is "the process of vicarious wish fulfillment by which civilized man enriches his circumscribed life and obtains emotional balance." This, of course, is nothing more than the process by which every artist has projected himself; and to say that by reading, listening to music, witnessing a play or dreaming a dream, one "escapes from the monotony of existence" is to repeat not merely a psychological truism but an ordinary tea-table platitude. As a book, *Forslin* is not quite integrated; the mosaic of stories does not make an altogether successful pattern. Many of the individual pages

and a few of the narratives flash with unusual brilliance. But the most vigorous passages are spoiled by the intrusion of artificial languors; there is too much of a rococo "Death, among violins and paper roses," too much of the eighteen-nineties in notes like "Death would be sweet, if one might poison music."

What is even more disastrous to this volume is Aiken's preoccupation with the back-alleys of sex. The pages swarm with literary lamias, prostitutes, pimps, amatory murderers, suicides, syphilitics, dingy hotel bedrooms, peg-house debaucheries.

> Music from concertinas in an alley,
> And cats with slow green eyes,—
> A thousand nights have died as this night dies.
> The stars dance out, the air blows warm tonight,
> The girls are all in white.
> Bargains are struck, they laugh, they glide away,
> Some to love and some to lust.
> In smoky lounges tired musicians play.
> The harlot's slippers are grey with dust. . . .

This is Aiken's chief neurosis; he cannot shake off what might be called an adolescent underworld complex. It makes *The Jig of Forslin* not only an object-lesson in poetic principles but an illuminating study in introversion.

In *Nocturne of Remembered Spring* (The Four Seas Company, 1917) Aiken seems further inhibited by an increasing weariness; try as he will, he cannot rouse himself to the sunlight for more than a moment. The most vigorous notes are in the earlier verses, included as companion pieces to the first volume. An old and subtle perfume has been injected into the poet's ink; he writes as if he were drugged with the pale wine of other men. There is an undoubted glamour here, but it is that of a soiled loveliness.

A typical strain, the "Episode in Grey," begins:

> So, to begin with, dust blows down the street,
> In lazy clouds and swirls, and after that
> Tatters of paper and straws, and waves of heat,
> And leaves plague-bitten; under a tree a cat
> Sprawls in the sapless grass, and shuts his eye.
> And sitting behind closed shutters you hear a beat
> Of melancholy steps go slowly by. . . .

And so it proceeds—a fatigued reminder of *The Jig of Forslin* faintly enlivened by an infusion of T. S. Eliot's conversational idiom. Even the poignance seems on the point of falling asleep. The dusk grows heavy; the shadows blur; everything dissolves in a cloud of forgetfulness.

> Well, I am tired . . . tired of all these years,
> The hazy mornings, the noons, the misty evenings;
> Tired of the spring, tired of the fall,—
> The music starts again, I have heard it all. . . .

*The Charnel Rose* (The Four Seas Company, 1918) has three sections, the first two of which are far more notable than the long title-poem, which is a "symphony" on the theme of nympholepsy. Certain of the "Variations" must be reckoned among Aiken's suavest lyrics—particularly the eighth, the twelfth and the fourteenth. But the first section is the book's chief exhibit. It is called "Senlin: A Biography" and does, in less space and with greater power, what Aiken had already attempted—Senlin being a blood-brother to the larger Forslin. A portion of the second part of this beautifully molded design has been quoted in various anthologies under the caption "Morning Song of Senlin" and, though it is probably the most musical segment, there are other passages as suggestive if not so mellifluous. Here is a fragment from the section "His Dark Origins" which sets

the key for the entire piece—and for much of Aiken's other work.

> The city dissolves about us, and its walls
> Become an ancient forest. There is no sound
> Except where an old twig tires and falls;
> Or a lizard among the dead leaves crawls;
> Or a flutter is heard in darkness along the ground.
> Has Senlin become a forest? Do we walk in Senlin?
> Is Senlin the wood we walk in,—ourselves,—the world?
> Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . No answer,
> Only soft broken echoes backward hurled. . .
>
> Yet we would say this is no wood at all,
> But a small white room with lights upon the wall;
> And Senlin, before us, pale, with reddish hair,
> Lights his pipe with a meditative stare.

*The House of Dust* (The Four Seas Company, 1920) accentuates Aiken's love of diminishing chords. Here is a poet who composes almost exclusively in misty minors: a slow rain falls and pale moons decline in these ebbing verses. Here the reader is led through soundless labyrinths down muffled stairs to subterranean caves washed by languidly foaming seas. Twilight seems perpetual and a tolling of soft bells, like a lost refrain, makes one hear the burden of

> . . . leaf on falling leaf,
> Rain and sorrow and wind and dust. . .

But there are many who prefer the doleful keys to melodies in a too-insistent major. The explanation for Aiken's inability to reach his audience lies deeper. And it lies, I believe, in the success—not in the failure—of his achievement.

Barring his early work, Aiken's poetry attempts, in one form or another, to record the interplay between man's

dreams and his casual acts, the mingling of memory and the living moment, the hundred daily clashes between realism and fantasy. This fluctuant course of the unconscious is again traced in *The House of Dust,* reaching its logical conclusion—almost a reductio ad absurdum—in *The Pilgrimage of Festus* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1923). Here one stumbles upon the crux of the matter. In becoming a more and more sensitive recorder of the half-illusory, half-elusive states of mind, Aiken has recreated that vagueness, that dream-like limbo in which the reader, unwilling to leave a wideawake world, is bewildered and lost. And, in yielding to the dictates of this nebular mood, the poet is also lost. He no longer guides the dark current; it directs him. It carries him, half-submerged, past his hearers, beyond himself.

Thus, in Aiken's very fidelity to his purpose, he achieves a futile success. And the medium which he has chosen to embody the wavering dictates of the dream contributes to the effect with a narcotic power. Here is a music practically perfect in its watery atmosphere; a music threading its way through drowned forests, rising like a mist of blurred colors. It is the music of a hypnotized Chopin, of a somnambulating Debussy; in its stopped horns and muted violins one can hear

> The profound gloom of bells among still trees,
> Like a rolling of huge boulders beneath seas.

It adheres remorselessly to its program. Aiken persists in making his poems as much like symphonies as possible—dividing them into movements, re-stating and developing each *leit-motif,* using certain phrases as leading themes—forgetting that the two arts have a few basic differences that it is well to keep separate. In attempting to capture the province of absolute music, by overemphasizing the sensuous quality and tonal value of words, the poet loses the very vitality and rigor which is the life-blood of language.

Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

CONRAD AIKEN

Even as a musician he fails to hold his magic except during brief passages, for Aiken (like Swinburne to whom, for all his differences in temper and material, he is strangely related) is so indiscriminate in his use of the slow melodic line that his language loses not only its strength but its variability. His music is at least logical in reflecting his attitude to life. Let his compatriots shriek themselves hoarse, he seems to say. While an inexpressible world sounds its barbaric yawp, Aiken, from the pillows of a dreamy disillusion, expresses himself in a musical yawn.

*Punch: The Immortal Liar* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) compels a revision of judgment. Just after it has been conceded that Aiken's gift, for all its sensitized music, is limited to the nervous twitchings of the unconscious, to a too-ready response to the crepuscular mood and to a preoccupation with nuances and overtones of a pale *morbidezza,* Aiken publishes a volume that disputes and, in more than a few sections, successfully contradicts most of these conclusions.

*Punch*: *The Immortal Liar* (one wonders whether Mr. Knopf, by dropping the colon from the cover, took a perverse pleasure in changing the title to a simple imperative sentence) connects seven long poems and divides them in two main parts. The two halves illustrate, more skilfully than anything Aiken has attempted, the clash of reality and the wish: the half ironic, half tragic conflict between fantasy and the fact. Aiken deals with most of his old psychic apparatus —nostalgia, jealousy, revenge, repression, disillusion—but he achieves somehow (often, strangely enough, by an evocation of his earliest imitative idiom) a new poignancy. The bluster of the Masefieldian couplets, although there are twice too many of them, admirably projects the swaggering, confident, boastfully lecherous Punch of the first part. The strange height of this passage, one of Aiken's most brilliant pieces of phantasmagoria, occurs when Punch, weary

of his easy conquests, wagers his soul with the devil that he can win the inaccessible Queen of Sheba. Punch, according to his own heroic account, triumphs and bursts into the colorful climax of his narrative—curiously reminiscent of the tune in Lindsay's "Congo"—of which the following is a fragment:

> At once sweet music thrilled the air!
> Heliogabulus tore his hair!
> Solomon raged and broke his crown,
> Vermilion birds flew singing down,
> Horns and cymbals stormed at the wall
> And a dancing madness took them all. . .
> And how we danced and how we sang,
> And how that glittering palace rang
> With music under the rosy moon
> Of horn and cymbal and bassoon!
> Heliogabulus was my slave,
> And Judas nightly from his grave
> Rose with a sheet about his loins
> To dance before us for copper coins,
> Weeping, weeping for his sins
> To a cheerful tune from violins. . .

But the first part, in spite of its vivid setting and sharpness of exposition, is the lesser half of the work. It is the second section that struggles toward—and frequently attains —new summits. Here Punch, stripped of the mask of gaudy villainy in which he has confronted the world, is revealed as the timid, solitary dreamer—no longer the braggart Punch of tradition, but a pitiful soul floundering in a net that he only half perceives; jerked and gesticulating with little knowledge of what moves him—a characterization, in fine, of man as marionette. Here he is the stumbler, the awkward failure, his spirit a battleground of hungers and frustrations; letting himself sink in deepening floods of

hopelessness; determining, in vague bursts of desperation, to be as other men seem to be.

> Well, then, if others lied, he too would lie. . .
> These faces of the smiling men he knew,
> Baker and constable and mayor and hangman,
> What did they mean? Were they, as they pretended,
> Such gloating misers of illegal riches? . . .
> As their imagined faces swam before him,
> Ruddy or pale, they seemed to avert their eyes,—
> Like those who close their windows to a burglar.
> Ah! that was it—they lied. And they, like him,
> Walked always warily, for fear of nets,
> Ran hard in darkness when they thought none saw them,
> And, in their secret chambers, wept for terror.

Down he goes, engulfed by wave upon sickening wave of impotence. The net gathers closer, the wires are twitched more rudely; he is less than a puppet—he becomes a symbol seen through a fog, a gesture lost in a nightmare. An epilogue, "Mountebank Feels the Strings at His Heart," displays the creator himself as blood-brother to his own creation, moving bewildered, through a half lit, ever darkening labyrinth. In such moments and in its undercurrent of bafflement, Punch is a legitimate child of Forslin and Senlin and (though both Cabell and Aiken would rise to resent the implication) of the Cabellian Jurgen and Manuel as well. But in his communication of this poignance, Aiken has transcended himself.

Yet Aiken has not forgotten how to sing. There are lyric interludes in this volume as insinuating as anything he has conceived with the exception of Senlin's "Morning Song." It is even a richer music than he has hitherto found; to the low violas and watery wood-winds, Aiken has added a tuba and palpitating though indistinct drums. One of the sections which will undoubtedly be rifled for quotations

is a group of songs bound together by the caption "He Imagines That His Puppet Has a Dark Dream and Hears Voices." Such lyrics as the ones beginning "Death, you will wear a chain of gold," "Open a window on the world," and "Sheba, now let down your hair," are scarcely less lovely than the snatch that begins

> There is a fountain in a wood
> Where wavering lies a moon:
> It plays to the slowly falling leaves
> A sleepy tune.
>
> . . . The peach-trees lean upon a wall
> Of gold and ivory;
> The peacock spreads his tail, the leaves
> Fall silently.
>
> There, amid silken sounds and wine
> And music idly broken,
> The drowsy god observes his world
> With no word spoken.

In *Priapus and the Pool* (Dunster House: Cambridge, 1922), Aiken seems to admit that he is primarily a lyricist and gives us twenty-five limpid if not extremely varied songs. Examining the bulk of his previous work, one is struck again by Aiken's desire—and the determination—to be a verbal symphonist. This desire is sometimes implicit, sometimes actually declared on the title page. And here one encounters the chief defect in his program: His symphonies consist of one movement only—and that one, the slow movement. There are no contrasting *allegros,* no sudden scherzos, no nimble *presto* passages to vary and accentuate his themes—only a chain of lyrical *lamentosos, andante cantabiles,* sustained and singing *adagios.* Almost all of his lines are timed for sad gestures, slowly moving feet.

But it is not only the measured pace of Aiken's melodies that limits his audience, it is the manner in which he orches-

trates them. Pallid flutes, muffled oboes, muted violins carry this music through a progression of nebular half-tones, translunar nuances of color. Aiken, seemingly aware of a monotony of woodwinds, often over-compensates by continual allusions to trumpets sounded on purple hills and horns blown through dusky streets. But he is innocent of the instrument; the *timbre* of the brasses scarcely ever reaches our ears. Aiken has written, for the first time in our poetry, a series of one-movement symphonies to be played *sempre piano, con sordino.*

As separate songs, however, several of those in *Priapus and the Pool* are as subtly moving as those of any singer in America to-day. A few, indeed, are weak and sentimentally out of the picture. But the fifth poem (originally entitled "Portrait of a Girl") and the charming whimsy "When trout swim down Great Ormond Street" establish Aiken in a niche which he does not seem at all anxious to occupy. It is the melodist rather than the creator of symphonies who can achieve syllables as flexible as those which begin the fifth poem of this series:

> This is the shape of the leaf, and this of the flower,
> And this the pale bole of the tree
> Which watches its bough in a pool of unwavering water
> In a land we never shall see.
>
> The thrush on the bough is silent, the dew falls softly,
> In the evening is hardly a sound.
> And the three beautiful pilgrims who come here together
> Touch lightly the dust of the ground.
>
> Touch it with feet that trouble the dust but as wings do,
> Come shyly together, are still,
> Like dancers who wait, in a pause of the music, for music
> The exquisite silence to fill . . .

*The Pilgrimage of Festus* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1923) is another symphonic attempt—this time an extended essay in

epistemology. Festus is the lineal descendant of Forslin and Senlin, although he is a more determined (if more baffled) seeker after the heart of knowledge. The best of this volume is the first section, which originally appeared in *A Miscellany of American Poetry*—1920 (Harcourt, Brace & Company), in which the accents of Aiken himself interrupt those of his phantom-double. Too long and too serious to achieve popularity, *Festus* must command any reader's respect if it does not rouse his enthusiasm.

What, then, is the future of so unadjusted a talent? Must Aiken cultivate cacophony to save his too melodious melodies? Will the next step—granting that he can go no further in pursuit of the music of the unconscious—be the return to a simpler form, a condensation of the exquisite "Variations," and the subtly articulated "Morning Song from Senlin"? Or, developing the dramatic impulse manifest in *Forslin* and such vivid narratives as "The Fulfilled Dream," will Aiken find himself in the poetic play or a condensed novel? Either development will be natural and rich in possible result. One thing still stands in his way—the inhibition that has kept Aiken's work remote and unresolved. All artists may be rudely divided into two classes: those who accept and those who evade the world. Aiken, like many of his contemporaries, has remained in a third class— a class comprising those who are torn by their indecision, being unable either to accept modern life or to reject it. With a fresh point of departure and a genuine adjustment to the world of reality, Aiken may find a larger power and a wider audience. And, whether the medium be prose or verse, his sensitivity need not be lost; it may well add new values to the roaring diapason of our day.

# ALFRED KREYMBORG
## AND "OTHERS"

Alfred Kreymborg occupies a triple position in contemporary poetry, and any appraisal of him must take into account his three-fold activities as propagandist, puppeteer and poet. It was in the first of these rôles that he assumed earliest prominence. As editor of that unaffiliated group of radicals, mood-jugglers and verbal futurists which comprised "Others," as well as editor of the three anthologies published under the same name, Kreymborg attained a bizarre publicity which obscured his own talent and only helped to retard his development. A picture of that development will have added value if placed against its proper background, and so it might be well to begin a study of this poet by first examining a few of those for whom he acted as impresario.

One of the outstanding features in the work of certain experimenters is a consistent distortion not only of past standards but of present values. This distortion is the natural consequence of an unnatural fear of formulas, an exaggerated horror of any accepted pattern. As an expression of insurrectionary youth, as a scornful contempt hurled at a literary philistinism, this revolt is the sign of a healthy and creative discontent. But when, in an effort to avoid the *cliché* at any cost, it becomes incoherent in metaphors that are more delirious than daring, when it pulls any casual image to pieces or turns a vagrant emotion into a dark study, it is likely to be a confession of its own creative failure—an admission of an inability to work and play with

the material of life. One does not have the right to demand continuous high spirits from the poetically young; one does hope, however, to be saved from the blasé retrospections of crabbéd youth.

Let me particularize. I turn to a long introspective poem in which a young man, afflicted with an enervating neurosis, is obsessed by the dark thought not of death, as has been the habit of poetic young men, but of the dissolution of middle age and the tragedy of thinning hair. The poem hegins casually enough:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky . . .

And then the poet stopped. "You and I" . . . "evening" . . . "sky" . . . It had a familiar and hence abhorred sound. This was obviously a bad start. Even at its birth, the poem was in danger of dying of premature senility. A hasty subcutaneous injection of some startling simile might save it. Therefore:

> . . . evening is spread out against the sky—
> Like a patient etherized upon the table.

Thus the opening of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," possibly the most successful expression of futility achieved in this era.

Another triumph of the bizarre over the obvious occurs in F. S. Flint's "Eau Forte," the first two lines of which are:

> On black, bare trees a stale-cream moon
> Hangs dead, and sours the unborn buds.

So with *Others,* in which many of the contributors are interested not so much in an art as an attitude toward it. A great part of their labor is the result of displeasure in the

work of others rather than delight in their own expressions. Their resentment of the academes is so great that it prevents the freedom of which they boast and they are chained to their impulse to startle; slaves of fashion which, in dress and poetry, is the most transitory of things.

These generalities are not to be construed as an indictment of all the contributors. Exceptions must be made at the very drawing-up of the charge. The most remarkable element in *Others—1916* (Alfred A. Knopf) is its incongruity of assemblage. On one page, there are the delicate lines of Adelaide Crapsey and on another the blatant absurdities of Skipwith Cannell; Mary Carolyn Davies' unpretentious "Songs of a Girl" are separated by only a few sheets from Mina Loy's nephritic "Love Songs." I quote, as Exhibit A, the first of Miss Loy's *chansons d'amour*:

Spawn of fantasies
Sitting the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
Rooting erotic garbage
"Once upon a time"
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous membrane
I would an eye in a Bengal light
Eternity in a sky-rocket
Constellations in an ocean
Whose rivers run no fresher
Than a trickle of saliva

There are suspect places.

I must live in my lantern
Trimming subliminal flicker
Virginal to the bellows
Of experience
Colored glass.

Another who appears to his own disadvantage in the

group is Orrick Johns. From a mixed assortment of his "Olives" (in the *Others* anthology) I pick these two more or less ripe specimens:

SHOE-STRING

Litttle old shoe,
You need a shoe-string;
I shall find one for you,
For without it you are helpless
As a man who studies regulations;
But with a yellow one
Like a woman who is bald.

SOMEWHERE

Now I know
I have been eating apple-pie for breakfast
In the New England
Of your sexuality.

These maladroit exercises in cleverness betray nothing so much as a mind that is not naturally acrobatic. It is the same failing that exhibits itself so pitifully in the poor dialect verse that comprises the first division of Johns's volume, *Asphalt and Other Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1917). But it is a far different poet that emerges from the rest of his book, particularly in the section "Country Rhymes." Here the affectations are forgotten; the self-conscious strain goes into songs that are anything but cerebral. For the few that are reminiscent, there are several poems here that carry strangeness beneath their sometimes familiar music. "Little Things" has a dignity and loveliness of its own; "Mysteries" is as fresh as it is unaffected; "Dilemma," "The Horns of Peace," "Dignity," and "The Mad Woman" are more lyrical that ninety per cent of the poems that masquerade as lyrics. All of them have grace, design and a supple melodic line. Johns is a genuine singer when he cares to be. Out of the

company of *Others,* these rhymes prove it—and none of them more positively than this poem where meaning and music are inextricably interknit:

THE INTERPRETER

In the very early morning when the light was low
She got all together and she went like snow,
Like snow in the springtime on a sunny hill,
And we were only frightened and can't think still.

We can't think quite that the katydids and frogs
And the little crying chickens and the little grunting hogs,
And the other living things that she spoke for to us
Have nothing more to tell her since it happened thus.

She never is around for any one to touch,
But of ecstasy and longing she too knew much . . .
And always when any one has time to call his own
She will come and be beside him as quiet as a stone.

In 1916, poetry was enjoying "boom times." Poetry magazines were breaking out everywhere. Prizes were blossoming on every bush; anthologies were thicker than office-seekers in Washington. It was the time of manifestos, movements, overnight schools, sudden departures. The Cubists, Futurists, Imagists, Impressionists, Vorticists had all taken a hand at rejuvenating the staid and perplexed Muse. And so, in November, the literary world accepted, with a mixture of complacence and sophistication, a book of poetic experiments entitled *Spectra* (Mitchell Kennerley, 1916). There was a properly cryptic dedication to Remy de Gourmont by Emanuel Morgan (described as an American painter who had studied in Paris but had not succeeded) and a characteristic prose preface by the other half of the school, Anne Knish ("a Hungarian woman who had written for European journals and had published a volume of poems in Russian under a Latin title.") This preface disclosed,

with essential vagueness and more than the usual detail, the Spectrist philosophy, the theory that "the theme of a poem is to be regarded as a prism, upon which the colorless white light of infinite existence falls and is broken up into glowing, beautiful and intelligible hues. In its second sense, the term *Spectric* relates to the reflex vibrations of physical sight, and suggests the luminous appearance which is seen after exposure of the eye to intense light, and (by analogy) the after-colors of the poet's initial vision. In its third sense, Spectric connotes the overtones, adumbrations, or spectres which for the poet haunt all objects both of the seen and the unseen world,—those shadowy projections, sometimes grotesque, which, hovering around the real, give to the real its full ideal significance and its poetic worth."

Within a few months, the Spectrists had arrived! *Others, A Magazine of the New Verse,* devoted its entire January 1917 number to *Spectra*; William Marion Reedy, after private commendations of this new and "virile school," published his enthusiasms in his *Reedy's Mirror*; John Gould Fletcher wrote of their "vividly memorable lines"; an erudite essayist in *The Forum* analyzed and extolled the poems, which were headed (not with such ordinary things as titles) but with opus numbers; *The Little Review* requested poems and published them with gusto and congratulations. Disciples announced themselves overnight—the battlefield of "this most daring of the new tendencies" was clearly won. Revolutionary poets proved their radicalism by excoriating those of their fellows who refused to recognized the advent of a new power in literature; reviewers and undergraduates deserted their fixed stars to gape at this new and brilliant constellation . . . Here is one of Emanuel Morgan's most celebrated separations of "the rays which recombine and focus in the reader's brain":

OPUS 14

Beside the brink of dream
I had put out my willow-roots and leaves
As by a stream
Too narrow for the invading greaves
Of Rome in her trireme . . .
Then you came—like a scream
Of beeves.

And here is one of Anne Knish's adumbrations:

OPUS 195

Her soul was freckled
Like a bald head
Of a jaundiced Jewish banker.
Her hair and featurous face
Withered like
An albino boa-constrictor.
She thought she resembled the Mona Lisa.
This demonstrates the futility of thinking.

"Opus 88" of Emanuel Morgan, which ran in the "Spectric number" of *Others*, ends thus:

The drunken heart is as full of hops
as a red squirrel . . .
There is a stone wall, leading to a motherly tree,
Which clicks with the flickering caress
And parts for the leap—
And you, beloved,
Are a nut.

It seems incredible to-day that such obvious absurdities could be taken seriously. Yet it was not until after America entered the war that many of the Intelligentzia realized how pitifully they had revealed themselves and how easily they had been tricked. For Anne Knish received a captain's com-

mission and went to France as Arthur Davison Ficke. And Emanuel Morgan (the originator of the Spectrist theory) confessed that he had determined to form an ultra-modern school of poetry in order to enjoy the antics of the self-confessed "moderns," that the name of the new school was suggested by a program of the Russian Ballet that lay open at *Le Spectre de la Rose,* and that he really was Witter Bynner . . . A gay masquerade, a hoax twice as interesting as Barnum's Cardiff giant and ten times as effective in its revelation of the truth of the eminent P. T.'s most famous epigram. All the windy explanations that followed Bynner's disclosure of his audacious joke have not obscured the brightness of this sprightly chapter in our literary renascence.

In the second anthology of *Others—1917* (Alfred A. Knopf) one suspects Kreymborg the editor of desiring to rouse more antagonism than before, not only among those antiquarians who believe that the sonnet form may outlast Futurism, but among those anarchs whose poetic radicalism expresses itself in capitalized emotions and lower-case letters at the beginning of each line. Kreymborg does not even wait for an argument; he plants a chip on his shoulder (or, to be more precise, on the flamboyant cover) by inserting the definite article in his subtitle, "An Anthology of The New Verse." And yet there is a sly reason for its employment, since the most definite thing about the volume is that article. I turn to the first poem in the book; a study, I venture to say, in differential calculus, by Walter Conrad Arensberg, entitled "Ing." The first dozen lines shape themselves thus:

Ing? Is it possible to mean ing?
Suppose
for the termination in g
a disoriented
series

of the simple fractures
in sleep.
Soporific
has accordingly a value for soap
so present to
sew pieces.
And p says: Peace is.

This, however, is only one phase of Mr. Arensberg's gift. The reader who is inclined to a more lush lyricism may prefer the poet when he turns to the painting of landscapes, as in the lines entitled "For 'Shady Hill,' Cambridge, Mass." I ruthlessly detach two colorful segments:

A drink into home use indicates early Italian. Other wise
*"the element of how*
*keeps insides. Nothing has now."*

But after the carpet whose usury can eat thirds?

Blunders are belted in cousins. Use what listens on Sunday; and catchy elms will oxidize pillows. Any news is original in absence. . . .

*which have the butters of extra broken*
*on badges biting a needle to partners*
*if only the bridge is fluent*
*let it not nice.*

It is a far cry from these lines to Mr. Arensberg's latest achievement, although from such cryptic beginnings a psychologist might have predicted *The Cryptography of Shakespeare* (Howard Bowen, 1922) in which Arensberg not only claims all of Shakespeare for Bacon but also discovers "a single cross-gartered acrostic spelling in *Doctor Faustus,* which is sufficient in itself alone to prove that one of the pseudonyms of Francis Bacon is the name of Christopher Marlowe." If this is progress, make the most of it!

If for no other purpose than historical documentation, such examples must have a place in these pages. It is, at least, curious to observe how, in an age of uncertain intensity, there still existed some poets who were content to make elaborately artificial decorations, for whom life was too vigorous and health too vulgar. When the breath of Whitman swept like a great gust over the fields of poetry, it seemed that the affectations, the soft sighings were blown away; that, confronted with this new and more human singing, the limp lilies withered and the lithe, lank Liliths picked up their Burne-Jonesian skirts and scurried off. But, thanks to Messrs. and Mesdames Arensberg, Cannell, Loy, Rodker, Sanborn, D'Orge, et al., the tradition was revived. The lilies, tenderly transplanted, grew into bewildering, multicolored mushrooms; the Liliths, having studied Freud, began to exhibit their inhibitions and learned to misquote Havelock Ellis at a moment's notice. Their impulses were not merely nostalgic but neurasthenic; the odor their work exhaled was that of synthetic roses decaying in a heavily curtained room. It was, preëminently, the art of evasion, of eroticism gone to seed, of a perfumed and purposeless revolt.

It should be added at once that *Others* not only gave a hearing to platitudinarians whose falsetto radicalism made their attempts at iconoclasm sound doubly thin, but obtained an audience for several who have since achieved position if not prominence, and whose work will be dealt with separately. Some of the more notable experimentalists were T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Maxwell Bodenheim, Marianne Moore and Kreymborg himself. One leaves the "Others" anthologies for a closer consideration of their editor.

Kreymborg is, first of all, a whimsical philosopher. One of his shortest poems, a brevity which was more quoted and ridiculed than any other piece of *vers libre,* is essentially a

profound analysis accompanied by the flutter of an eyelash, a fable in foolscap.

THE TREE

I am four monkeys.
One hangs from a limb,
tail-wise,
chattering at the earth;
another is cramming his belly with cocoanut;
the third is up in the top branches,
quizzing the sky;
and the fourth—
he's chasing another monkey.
How many monkeys are you?

Such lightly tripping psychology is typical of Kreymborg's first book, *Mushrooms* (John Marshall Co., Ltd., 1916). Often he sacrifices the clarity of thought for a strained primitiveness of speech. In such passages as "Variations," he is, however, not simple; he attains merely an ostentation of simplicity, an ingenuousness that is too affectedly naïf. But, for the most part, he is unassuming and earnest. Here are delicate etchings and concise ironies; a neat disposal if not a solution of intricacies. There is freshness as well as dexterity in "Parasite," "Cortège," "To Circe," "In a Dream," "Idealists"; there is grace and an almost personal charm in these twinkling lines. Here is an unusually pointed instance of his indirect and somewhat mincing irony:

VISTA

The snow,
ah yes, ah yes indeed,
is white and beautiful, white and beautiful,
verily beautiful—
from my window.

The sea,
ah yes, ah yes indeed,
is green and alluring, green and alluring,
verily alluring—
from the shore.
Love,
ah yes, ah yes, ah yes indeed,
verily yes, ah yes indeed!

Frequently his imagination overleaps itself and lands him in dullness; the fooling that should have been light is laborious, the whimsy grows heavy-footed, elephantastic. But Kreymborg is little short of exquisite in certain periods of restrained fancy, in the fragility of such a moment as:

OLD MANUSCRIPT

The sky
is that beautiful old parchment
in which the sun
and the moon
keep their diary.
To read it all,
one must be a linguist
more learned than Father Wisdom;
and a visionary
more clairvoyant than Mother Dream.
But to feel it,
one must be an apostle:
one who is more than intimate
in having been, always,
the only confidant—
like the earth
or the sea.

In *Plays for Poem-Mimes* (The Others Press, 1918; Revised Edition published under the title, *Puppet Plays*, with an Introduction by Gordon Craig, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923) and *Plays for Merry Andrews* (The Sun-

wise Turn, 1920) Kreymborg attempts to apply to poetry the principles of modern art, cutting away at his lines until they assume an almost dazzling nakedness. Frequently, he overreaches himself and what should be innocently child-like becomes merely childish. "Jack's House" is an example. For all its Harlequin gestures it sinks to a formula, a stereotype which endeavors, by an insistence of monosyllables, to preserve the open-eyed wonder of childhood. The words curtsey, stare at you, grow inarticulate. Without Kreymborg's running elucidations on the mandolute, there is little music and less magic in his infant syllables or such babbling repetitions as:

> We have a one-room home.
> You have a two-room, three-room, four-room.
> We have a one-room home
> because a one-room home is all we have.
> We have a one-room home
> because a one-room home holds all we have.
> We have a one-room home
> because we do not want
> a two-room, three-room, four-room.
> If we had a two-room, three-room, four-room
> we would need more than a one-room home.
> We have a one-room home.
> We like a one-room home.

Kreymborg's concern with puppet plays has been somewhat of a handicap to his growth. Influenced by his own fondness for the marionette, he has continually played behind masks. Even *Blood of Things* (Nicholas L. Brown, 1920), in spite of a few extraordinarily vivid sections, betrays the stiff and angular posturings of his models. Kreymborg is continually in danger of being too doll-charming or too doll-tragic.

In *Less Lonely* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923) the

masks are discarded; there is nothing between Kreymborg and his reader. This desire for direct communication speaks audibly in "Halos" and possibly most clearly in one of the recent poems, which might act as the motto for his later work.

ADAGIO: A DUET

(FOR J. S. AND L. U.)

Should you
lay ear to these lines,
you will not catch
a distant drum of hoofs,
cavalcade of Arabians,
passionate horde bearing down,
destroying your citadel—
but maybe you'll hear—
should you just
listen at the right place,
hold it tenaciously,
give your full blood to the effort—
maybe you'll note the start
of a single step,
always persistently faint,
wavering in its movement
between coming and going,
never quite arriving,
never quite passing—
and tell me which it is,
you or I
that you greet,
searching a mutual being—
and whether two aren't closer
for the labour of an ear?

*Less Lonely* suggests, far more than Kreymborg's previous work, certain human relations. He comes closer, he begins to explain himself. But the most striking feature in

this volume is its surprising amount of rhyme and regular meter. And, since Kreymborg's adoption of the strict forms is typical of what might be called the return of the *vers libretine,* a digression may be allowed to account for this phenomenon.

For six years—from 1914 to 1920, to be coldly statistical —*vers libre* was the fashion in these otherwise conservative States. Not only did the leaders of the style adapt their tropes and figures to this form but whole regiments of amateurs, imitators, and young men-about-literature cut their patterns along its attenuated lines. The three Imagist anthologies appeared in 1915, 1916, 1917, and, except for an occasional poem by D. H. Lawrence and the polyphonic prose pieces by Amy Lowell, one searched them in vain for a regular rhythm or even an irregular rhyme. John Gould Fletcher's "Goblins and Pagodas" and H. D.'s "Sea Garden" appeared; both volumes illustrating, in program and practice, a verse-form based upon "cadence" instead of meter. Amy Lowell went far further than Ezra Pound in her staccato idiom. Masters published that triumph of free verse, "Spoon River Anthology." Arturo Giovannitti and Clement Wood borrowed the "polyrhythmical" loquacity of Whitman for their own insurgent purposes. Maxwell Bodenheim performed his morganatic marriages of unhappily mated nouns and adjectives without benefit of rhyme or an orthodox ritual. And Alfred Kreymborg, surpassing them all in metrical heresy, perfected a *vers libre* so tenuous and brittle that melodic comments (performed by Kreymborg on his companionable mandolute) were required to hold it together.

So remote are these phenomena that, in the light of the new radicalism, they seem like musty fragments from the files of an antiquarian. For, with the exception of a few inflexible veterans like Pound and Sandburg, scarcely any one is left to defend the once commanding fort. The list

of deserters grows with every announcement of a publisher's spring list or a prize contest. Masters is writing almost entirely in conventional blank verse. Giovannitti's rhythms grow increasingly proper; Wood's are almost prim. Amy Lowell does not hesitate to express herself in ballad measures, or starched and polished tercets. Fletcher, discarding Imagism, is using not only rhyme but a much more balanced verse-structure. Bodenheim's poetry has become almost contemptuously formal, parading its pattern with an acrid nonchalance.

But the two most notable backsliders are H. D. and Alfred Kreymborg. H. D. was not merely the only true Imagist but the surest worker in unrhymed cadence. She had achieved that rare clarity and concision which (like the condensed epitaphs of "Spoon River Anthology") gave free verse, ordinarily so flabby, a dignity and distinction of form. In her chiseled strophes there was a crystallization that more than compensated for the absence of rhyme and regularity. Yet it does not seem to have reconciled its author to the loss. In her volume *Hymen,* rhyme is introduced with more than tentative effect; certain parts of the extended marriage ritual are so dexterously woven as to seem like the lyrics of a belated Elizabethan. And there is a dirge, called "Lethe," not yet printed in any of her collected works, which adds a gravely formal music without arresting the author's individual gesture.

The case of Kreymborg is even more significant. When he left America to help found *Broom* ("An International Magazine of the Arts," now defunct), his lines, growing more and more jagged, were almost monosyllabic in their brusque brevity. Eight months in Italy, and Kreymborg, in his search for more adequate forms, discovered a fresh utterance in—heart-breaking though it must have been to his frantic colleagues—sonnets! Further, he has admitted

that the sonnets—and more than thirty of them were produced in the village of Madonna di Campagna—have come as freely as free verse . . . and more sharply. "It has always had my veneration," Kreymborg wrote, speaking of the sonnet-form, "perhaps too much of it; perhaps, had it not been for that, I should have come to it sooner. Or possibly I wasn't ripe enough for the adventure." More than that, Kreymborg's new poems in the orthodox stanza-structures have gained in strength and lost none of that whimsical difference which made this poet's manner so strikingly his own.

To amplify the speculations that introduced these paragraphs, Is the return of the prodigal *vers libriste* due to a spontaneous revulsion of feeling? Or does it owe its impetus to the compulsion through which every artist is struggling—inconsistently enough—for both novelty and stability? Is it not true that after the natural early period of imitation the impulse to experiment is uppermost? And, having passed through the phase of experimenting with subject, pattern, and preoccupation with form, does not the seeker inevitably labor to perfect his idiom in some lasting shape? . . . So we see one creator after another turn to a *resisting* form, to a medium that does not submit too easily. Even the boy likes to cut into wood rather than wax; the sculptor chooses stone instead of putty. The poet, in the end, learns to enjoy the edged limitations of his verse as keenly as the painter appreciates the confines of his canvas. Learning to respect his material, does not the artist prefer to feel the victory of his will over a definite and sometimes defiant form? Furthermore, does he not relish his triumphs in an almost direct proportion to the difficulties he has overcome in imposing his desire as well as his personality upon the stubborn, slowly-consenting mold? These questions, several of which have a gratuitously rhetorical ring, may

prompt a variety of conclusions. To one, at least, they call for certain replies in the affirmative.

In Kreymborg's case, at least, there is little doubt that he has accomplished a new (for him) definiteness of line and that, incidentally, his expressions in *vers libre* have taught him how to make the rigid forms more flexible. His lyrics, mingling rhyme and assonance, are particularly limpid; such water-colors as "Crocus," "Snow Visits Maggiore," the end of "Rain Inters Maggiore," "Evergreen," and "Bloom," contain nuances which, without the use of rhyme, Kreymborg would never have found possible. I quote the first of these:

CROCUS

When trees have lost remembrance of the leaves
that spring bequeaths to summer, autumn weaves
and loosens mournfully—this dirge, to whom
does it belong—who treads the hidden loom?

When peaks are overwhelmed with snow and ice,
and clouds with crêpe bedeck and shroud the skies—
nor any sun or moon or star, it seems,
can wedge a path of light through such black dreams—

all motion cold, and dead all trace thereof:
What sudden shock below, or spark above,
starts torrents raging down till rivers surge—
that aid the first small crocus to emerge?

The earth will turn and spin and fairly soar,
that couldn't move a tortoise-foot before—
and planets permeate the atmosphere
till misery depart and mystery clear!

And yet, so insignificant a hearse?—
who gave it the endurance so to brave
such elements?—shove winter down a grave?—
and then lead on again the universe?

In these lyrics and in the second section of *Less Lonely* (which consists entirely of sonnets) Kreymborg reveals himself as sharply as in "Peasant," "Colophon" and two or three others in the concluding group. He has preserved his philosophical drollery but the undertones are deeper. Experience has steeled him and that tenderness which was always a trifle soft is no longer a weakly sympathetic note. The puppeteer has discovered his own strings.

III

# THE LYRICISTS—1

If there were any question concerning the release of poetic energy in America since 1900, statistics alone would furnish a mathematical answer. In the last decade, there have been twenty-one magazines devoted exclusively to the publication of poetry—Miss Monroe's pioneer *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* has held the contested field since 1912—Braithwaite's first modest *résumé* of magazine verse in 1913 has developed into a foliose hardy perennial, and a study of contemporary anthologies and lists of Poetry Societies reveals the startling information that there are more than five hundred professional poets—poets with printed volumes to their credit—practising their trade in America at this moment! So solemn a thought must make anyone pause—particularly one who is attempting a survey of the period. And since it is impossible even for *Who's Who in America* to list the accomplishments of more than a fraction of these (most of whom are writers of lyrics) I intend to devote this chapter to the consideration of four different types of singer, four lyricists who represent distinctive tendencies and who illustrate, in their very differences, the variety of modern song. Their work, for all its dissimilarities, presents one phase in common: a sharp contrast to the lyricist of the preceding generation. Most of the earlier love poetry gave one an ineradicable portrait of the singer in the pretty throes of composition (evidently in a candy-kitchen), sustained by fudge and marshmallows, dipping her pen in an inkwell running over with diluted syrups. Nothing could be less true of these four

singers. They have fed on life; their pens are dipped not only in ink but in their own blood.

I do not mean to imply that this outstanding quartet is representative of the hundred minstrels who please the populace with their amiable tinklings. These scores—and I suspect that their god is the Laureate of the Rotarians, the Pollyannapestic Edgar A. Guest—have scarcely a transient claim on our attention. Written around respectable rhymes and irreproachable sentiments, their lines are full of a simpering regularity; they suggest a melody that somehow is not music. They remind one of nothing so much as words of one syllable set to music by the composer of "A Perfect Day" or an air by Chaminade played on a metronome. Far different is the work of a score of other women—Louise Imogen Guiney, Zoe Akins, Harriet Monroe, Elizabeth Coatsworth, Eunice Tietjens, Mary Carolyn Davies, Amelia Josephine Burr, Jessie B. Rittenhouse, Olive Tilford Dargan, Grace Hazard Conkling (mother of the astonishing Hilda), Marguerite Wilkinson, Margaret Widdemer, Katherine Lee Bates, Fannie Stearns Davis, Louise Townsend Nicholl, Hazel Hall, Louise Bogan, Bernice Lesbia Kenyon, Florence Kiper Frank, Sarah N. Cleghorn, Grace Fallow Norton, Karle Wilson Baker, Léonie Adams, Ruth Comfort Mitchell, Genevieve Taggard, Winifred Welles, Marjorie Allen Seiffert . . . the list could be extended to the end of the chapter. The four which I have chosen must speak for these.

## SARA TEASDALE

None of the word-musicians has more completely and melodiously mastered her craft than Sara Teasdale. With the utmost simplicity of phrase and style, she achieves effects that are little short of magical; her stanzas, often without a single figure of speech, are more eloquent than a poem crammed with tropes and highly spiced similes. This per-

sonal utterance which, as Miss Teasdale's schooling has proceeded, has grown less and less studied, is already recognizable among many echoes in the early *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems* (Richard G. Badger, 1907). But in *Helen of Troy and Other Poems* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911) it is far stronger. And yet, excellent as are many of the short poems, Miss Teasdale has not attained her full singing power in this volume; her songs are surpassed by the six monologues that open the book. Helen of Troy, Beatrice, Sappho, Marianna Alcoforando (the Portuguese nun), Guenevere, Erinna ("pale Erinna of the perfect lyre," Sappho's favorite pupil)—these are all made to live in a blank verse so musical that it has an almost lyric intensity. Classical in subject, the treatment is as modern as any analytic probing; the figures are vitalized by an interpretation that is free and penetrating. The picture of Sappho grown old, singing her little daughter to sleep and dreaming of her old loves in Lesbos, is unusual and unforgettable—particularly in its half-pathetic, half-ironic ending:

> Ah, Love that made my life a lyric cry,
> Ah, Love that tuned my lips to lyres of thine,
> I taught the world thy music, now alone
> I sing for one who falls asleep to hear.

The volume is full of this impulsive beauty, a delicate spontaneity that, concerning itself little with poetic fashions and theories of form, proceeds directly from the heart rather than the head. I do not mean by this that Miss Teasdale's lyrics are without intellectual content. On the contrary, there are many poems that owe much of their appeal to the dexterity of their turns, to an idea that is primarily clever in conception, to the twist in a last line that puts one in mind of a poetizing O. Henry. One sees this even in so early a lyric as the facile:

THE SONG MAKER

I made a hundred little songs
That told the joy and pain of love,
And sang them blithely, tho' I knew
No whit thereof.

I was a weaver deaf and blind;
A miracle was wrought for me,
But I have lost my skill to weave
Since I can see.

For while I sang—ah swift and strange!
Love passed and touched me on the brow.
And I who made so many songs
Am silent now.

In her next volume, *Rivers to the Sea* (The Macmillan Company, 1915), this epigrammatic adroitness is emphasized. And it is accompanied by a greater skill. Witness, for instance, a poem like "Spring," with its concluding

Give over, we have laughed enough;
Oh dearest and most foolish friend,
Why do you wage a war with love
To lose your battle in the end?

Or observe how this intellectual stimulus is combined with a straighter sincerity in "Joy," in "After Love," in "The Answer," in "The Poor House" and possibly most hauntingly in such a condensed and unaffected composition as

When I am dead and over me bright April
Shakes out her rain-drenched hair,
Tho' you should lean above me broken-hearted,
I shall not care.

I shall have peace, as leafy trees are peaceful
When rain bends down the bough;
And I shall be more silent and cold-hearted
Than you are now.

Direct, eager, without ostentation or ornament, her lines move with a potency of their own. Sparing of metaphors, almost sparse in their clear expressiveness, these poems, usually limiting themselves to two or three simple quatrains, contain more sheer singing than those of any other living American poet. Miss Teasdale has a genius for the song, for the pure lyric in which the phrases seem to have fallen into place without art or effort. Consider such flawless snatches as "The Flight," "Swans," "A Prayer," "Enough," "The Answer," "Capri" and this:

NIGHT SONG AT AMALFI

I asked the heaven of stars
  What I should give my love—
It answered me with silence,
  Silence above.

I asked the darkened sea
  Down where the fishermen go—
It answered me with silence,
  Silence below.

Oh, I could give him weeping,
  Or I could give him song—
But how can I give silence
  My whole life long?

These poems, clean-cut and eloquent, are like nothing so much as rhymed Tanagras. They have the same delicacy of design, strength of outline and charm of gesture as those exquisite figurines. And, what is more, they have the same simplicity in their sharpness of execution and appeal. It is a simplicity, however, that is not always as naïve as it seems to be; it is Miss Teasdale's very sophistication which saves the volume from an impending musical monotony. There are indeed several occasions where the player seems harping

on a rather frayed and outworn string; lacking the intensive thrill, the love-song that should have lifted up its hearers falls somewhat flat. One notices this in the repetition of her minor moods, when her grief seems only a medium by which an effect is achieved, when she seems to be trying to grasp an emotion instead of being in the grip of one. One often hears a fine modulation instead of a piercing outcry; an anguish that is less passionate than pretty.

> For him the happiness of light,
> For me a delicate despair.

This "delicate despair" is likely to be Miss Teasdale's handicap. It is one of the things that can easily degenerate into a pattern. The other is the poet's overfrequent identification of herself with Nature, its creatures and its various manifestations. This "very-fraternal-with-the-elements" attitude (I quote Jack Collings Squire's serviceable phrase) is effective once in a while, but it soon becomes a mannerism as tiresome as any repeated *cliché*. It grows especially wearisome after a set series of "I am the pool of blue," "I am the still rain falling," "I am the river," "I was a child of the shining meadows," "I am a cloud," "I was a sister of the sky," "I am the brown bird pining," etc. . . . It is a careless dependence on a stock pattern of poetry, a lyrical laziness into which Miss Teasdale does not often fall. Her work usually maintains itself on the high level sounded in her occasional sapphics, in the blank verse "From the Sea," which is as thrilling as any of her lyrics and as lyric as any of her songs, and in the quiet poem that opens the volume with its note of personal hunger:

> Oh, is it not enough to be
> Here with this beauty over me?
> My throat should ache with praise, and I
> Should kneel in joy beneath the sky.

Oh, beauty are you not enough?
Why am I crying after love
With youth, a singing voice and eyes
To take earth's wonder with surprise?
Why have I put off my pride,
Why am I unsatisfied;
I, for whom the pensive night
Binds her cloudy hair with light,
I, for whom all beauty burns
Like incense in a million urns?
Oh, beauty, are you not enough?
Why am I crying after love?

*Love Songs* (The Macmillan Company, 1917), is a gathering of her old amatory verses, a few new ones and a lovely interlude, "Songs out of Sorrow." This collection emphasizes again how bare of verbal subtleties and bizarre images her verses are, and yet how full of a deeper magic they seem. The new poems—"Barter," "Refuge," "The Tree of Song," particularly the first of these—are a renewed verification. Theirs is an artlessness that is something of an art; they tend to the highest and, at the same time, the simplest type of song: the folksong, which betrays none of the file-marks of the craftsman and which seems to have been the inheritance of the people ever since there were words.

Some of these love songs, however, are less frank and genuine than one has a right to expect from Miss Teasdale. Several of them rise from a desire to please rather than a necessity to create. They are impelled by the mood of literary romance, of painted roses, moonstruck lilies, pasteboard balconies, beribboned mandolins; a mood that is not so much erotic as Pierrotic.

*Flame and Shadow* (The Macmillan Company, 1920) is the sublimation of her gifts. Here is all of the melodic grace of the earlier volumes and a depth that none of them attains. The force which intensifies these poems is spiritual

rather than intellectual, a gravity, a sadder wisdom which declares

> That what we never have, remains;
> It is the things we have that go.

Here is not only a more detached personality but an enriched utterance; it is scarcely the same precise singing that one finds in Miss Teasdale's previous work. Now that so many of the younger lyricists have learned her trick of tightening up an eight-line poem with a sudden twist, she has turned to something less patterned and more poignant. While other melodists are still copying the effects of Sara Teasdale, Miss Teasdale has stopped imitating herself. The subject-matter is still the same. Miss Teasdale seems limited to a preoccupation with death, landscapes, stars, the sea life, longing, and Beauty—generalities that prevent her from exploring the rich details they contain. She is satisfied to use the old themes—but what surprising variations she weaves around them! There are philosophic overtones, profound implications ascending from the material in such poems as "What Do I Care," "Places," "The Sowing," "Water Lilies," and the magical threnody "Let it be forgotten." Here are new rhythms, far more subtle than those she has ever employed; here are words chosen with a keener sense of their actual as well as their musical value, the line moves with a metrical inevitability. I quote the last, though by no means the least, of these poems; one of the most memorable moments in her poetry, eight lines which, in the very rise and fall of their syllables, hold the secret of music.

> Let it be forgotten, as a flower is forgotten,
> Forgotten as a fire that once was singing gold,
> Let it be forgotten for ever and ever,
> Time is a kind friend, he will make us old.

If anyone asks, say it was forgotten
Long and long ago,
As a flower, as a fire, as a hushed footfall
In a long forgotten snow.

Radiance plays around these verses. Beneath the symbolism of such poems, one is conscious of a firmer artistry through a more fluid speech. This loosening is the very proof of Miss Teasdale's advance. The flexibility of lines like "Water Lilies" and "The Long Hill" makes them all the lovelier; the slight (and logical) irregularities keep the pattern from hardening and—witness the rhythms of D. H. Lawrence and Walter De la Mare—supply a fresh surprise. Miss Teasdale's contribution to *American Poetry—1922* (Harcourt, Brace and Company) is even more significant. She continues to grow and her work becomes fuller, more resonant. A graver poet and a sadder person speaks in "Wisdom," "Twilight," and the "Two Songs for Solitude," which are a double answer to those who have sometimes accused her of a cloying softness.

THE CRYSTAL GAZER

I shall gather myself into myself again,
I shall take my scattered selves and make them one,
I shall fuse them into a polished crystal ball
Where I can see the moon and the flashing sun.

I shall sit like a sibyl, hour after hour intent,
Watching the future come and the present go—
And the little shifting pictures of people rushing
In tiny self-importance to and fro.

THE SOLITARY

My heart has grown rich with the passing of years,
I have less need now than when I was young
To share myself with every comer,
Or shape my thoughts into words with my tongue.

It is one to me that they come or go
If I have myself and the drive of my will,
And strength to climb on a summer night
And watch the stars swarm over the hill.

Let them think I love them more than I do,
Let them think I care, though I go alone,
If it lifts their pride, what is it to me
Who am self-complete as a flower or a stone?

The later volumes fulfil Miss Teasdale's promise and give it a new dignity. Theirs is a response to the passion of beauty which is, for all its disguises and evasions, as energetic as the passion for life.

## EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

In 1912, an anthology entitled *The Lyric Year* (Mitchell Kennerley) awarded three prizes to the contributions, none of which had appeared in any volume. Ten thousand poems (according to Ferdinand Earle, the editor) by nearly two thousand writers of verse were submitted and one hundred poems by as many poets were printed in this collection. Contrary to current belief, none of the three prizes was won by the outstanding poem in the book—a poem which has become one of the most famous in contemporary letters. Its author, totally unknown at the time, was little more than a child living on the sea-coast of Maine, and it was not until her first book was published five years later that it became possible to appraise the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

The poem to which I have referred—the title-poem of her *Renascence and Other Poems* (Mitchell Kennerley, 1917)—was written when Miss Millay was nineteen years old; it remains possibly the most astonishing performance of this generation. But it is far more than a performance; it is

a revelation. It begins like a child's aimless verse or a counting-out rhyme:

All I could see from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood;
I turned and looked another way,
And saw three islands in a bay.
So with my eyes I traced the line
Of the horizon, thin and fine,
Straight around till I was come
Back to where I'd started from;
And all I saw from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood.

After this almost inconsequential opening, the couplets develop into what first seems to be a descriptive idyl and then, growing out of a straightforward lyricism, mount into a rapt hymn to being. In this child's passion for identification with all of life, burns a splendor that attains nothing less than magnificence. She reaches up her hand and touches the sky, she sees "Immensity made manifold," she hears

The gossiping of friendly spheres,
The creaking of the tented sky,
The ticking of Eternity.

The universe, "cleft to the core," is open to her probing senses. In her desire for unity with all growth and suffering, the living earth surges through her.

A man was starving in Capri;
He moved his eyes and looked at me;
I felt his gaze, I heard his moan,
And knew his hunger as my own.
I saw at sea a great fog-bank
Between two ships that struck and sank;
A thousand screams the heavens smote;
And every scream tore through my throat.
No hurt I did not feel, no death

That was not mine; mine each last breath
That, crying, met an answering cry
From the compassion that was I.
All suffering mine, and mine its rod;
Mine, pity like the pity of God.

This spiritual intensity drives her to the very heart of existence. In a vision, she sees herself resting deep in the earth where consciousness becomes still keener.

The grass, a-tiptoe at my ear,
Whispering to me I could hear;
I felt the rain's cool finger-tips
Brush tenderly across my lips,
Laid gently on my sealed sight,
And all at once the heavy night
Fell from my eyes and I could see,—
A drenched and dripping apple-tree,
A last long line of silver rain. . . .

It is a cumulative rapture in which the climax comes like a burst of sudden trumpets; one is confronted by the revelation of forgotten magnificence. Mystery becomes articulate. It is as if a child had entered the room and, in the midst of ingenuousness, had uttered some lucid and blinding truth. There is a Blake-like poignance in the ever-ascending cadence, a leaping simplicity which cries:

O God, I cried, no dark disguise
Can e'er hereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity!
Thou canst not move across the grass
But my quick eye will see Thee pass,
Nor speak, however silently,
But my hushed voice will answer Thee.
I know the path that tells Thy way
Through the cool eve of every day;
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on Thy heart!

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

From a photograph
by Marcia Stein

This lyrical mastery is manifest on all except a few pages (such as "Interim" and "Ashes of Life," which lisp as uncertainly as the hundreds of poems to which they are too closely related); it shines particularly in the unnamed sonnets, the light "Afternoon on a Hill," the whimsical "When the Year Grows Old" and the remarkable "God's World," in which Miss Millay has communicated rapture in a voice that no lyricist of her time has surpassed for beauty. In the fourteen lines of "God's World" this poet sounds the same hunger which intensified "Renascence." Here the spiritual passion is so exalted that the poet trembles with and voices the breathless awe of thousands caught at the heart by a bird-note or a sunset. But where the others are choked in the brief moment of worship, she has made ecstasy articulate and almost tangible.

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
And all but cry with color! That gaunt crag
To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!
World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!

Long have I known a glory in it all,
But never knew I this;
Here such a passion is
As stretcheth me apart.—Lord, I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year;
My soul is all but out of me,—let fall
No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.

It is something of a shock to turn from *Renascence,* possibly the most amazing first book of the period, to the succeeding *A Few Figs from Thistles* (Frank Shay, 1920;

Revised Edition, Stewart Kidd Company, 1922). Here Miss Millay seems to have exchanged her birthright for a mess of cleverness; it is nothing more than a pretty talent that gives most of these light verses the quality of a facile cynicism, an ignoble adroitness. This is the "first fig":

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

Only the dilettanti of emotion could relish, after the radiance of her first poems, the sophisticated smirk that accompanies "The Penitent," "Thursday," "She Is Overheard Singing," "The Merry Maid," and others of the same easy genre.

And if I loved you Wednesday
Well, what is that to you?
I do not love you Thursday—
So much is true.

And why you come complaining
Is more than I can see.
I loved you Wednesday,—yes—but what
Is that to me?

One resents such lines not because one feels the poet may lose her quality by playing with fire, but because she is merely setting herself off in theatrical fireworks and so is in danger of losing her soul. The author of "God's World" is the last person who should deck passion with tinsel.

But there are deeper penetrations even in this volume. When Miss Millay is less consciously irresponsible, less archly narcistic, *A Few Figs from Thistles* bear riper fruit. "Portrait by a Neighbor" is a clear and delightful picture—

one cannot forget the scatter-brained dreamer who "weeds her lazy lettuce by the light of the moon," who "forgets she borrowed butter and pays you back cream!" "The Singing Woman from the Wood's Edge" (in the new edition) is no less playfully precise. And if, in *The Lamp and the Bell,* a tragedy in blank verse and five acts (Frank Shay, 1921), this gift of portraiture is strained beyond its power, there are many individual passages and several scenes of intensity on the theme of platonic love between two girl-companions. *Aria da Capo* (Mitchell Kennerley; the August, 1920, issue of Harold Monro's The Chapbook was devoted to its first appearance) is a much more poignant condensation; a tensely ironic one-act play in which the traditional Pierrot, Columbine, Corydon and Thyrsis are placed—the first pair frivolously, the two shepherds like protesting marionettes—against the terrible background of war.

*Second April* (Mitchell Kennerley, 1921) recaptures the earlier, concentrated ecstasy. There is little rhetoric here, no mere imitation of prettiness; the too-easy charm to which Miss Millay occasionally descends is replaced by a dignity, almost an austerity of emotion. Hers is a triumph not only of expression but above her idiom; she is one of the few living poets who can employ inversions, who can use the antiquated *forsooth, alack! prithee,* and *la,* and not seem an absurd anachronism. Possibly it is because Miss Millay is at heart a belated Elizabethan that she can use locutions which in the work of any other American would be affected and false. "The Blue-Flag in the Bog," a splendid sequel to "Renascence," contains this rapture undisguised; "The Bean-Stalk" reflects it in a lighter tone of voice. "The Poet and His Book" is almost as intensified, and "Journey," written in her 'teens, holds some of the loveliest lines Miss Millay has ever composed.

All my life long
Over my shoulder have I looked at peace;
And now I fain would lie in this long grass
And close my eyes.
Yet onward!
Cat-birds call
Through the long afternoon, and creeks at dusk
Are guttural. Whip-poor-wills wake and cry,
Drawing the twilight close about their throats;
Only my heart makes answer. Eager vines
Go up the rocks and wait; flushed apple-trees
Pause in their dance and break the ring for me. . . .
Round-faced roses, pink and petulant,
Look back and beckon ere they disappear.
Only my heart, only my heart responds.

Possibly the most haunting section of this volume is the "Memorial to D. C." These six lyrical epitaphs and dirges have a vibrancy which this poet has never surpassed, a pathos which is somber but in which bitterness has no part. "Prayer to Persephone" accomplishes the miracle of being pathetic and whimsical in the same breath; "Elegy," which the poet may well have addressed to herself, trembles with its own high notes. Its parts are so lyrically integrated that I risk the vandalism of detaching the conclusion of this poem:

Cherished by the faithful sun
On and on eternally
Shall your altered fluid run,
Bud and bloom and go to seed;
But your singing days are done;
But the music of your talk
Never shall the chemistry
Of the secret earth restore.
All your lovely words are spoken.
Once the ivory box is broken,
Beats the golden bird no more.

The sonnets which occur in all of Miss Millay's volume,

exhibit the same sensitive parsimony which is in the best of her lyrics. *Second April* contains twelve that have the bright phrasing cut down to the glowing core. Her highest achievement in this form, however, is, I believe, not here, but in the group "Eight Sonnets," which she contributed to *American Poetry—1922* (Harcourt, Brace and Company). The first six of these are as arresting as anything Miss Millay has accomplished; the sixth, indeed, is as fine a sonnet as this age has produced. This is the passionate evocation of magic, brilliant in its stripped clarity.

> Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.
> Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
> And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
> To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
> At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
> In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese
> Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
> From dusty bondage into luminous air.
>
> O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
> When first the shaft into his vision shone
> Of light anatomized! Euclid alone
> Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
> Who, though once only and then but far away,
> Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

It is such felicity of language that gives the poetry of Edna Millay the power of resonant speech; hers is a voice that is both intellectually thrilling and emotionally moving.

## ELINOR WYLIE

Elinor Wylie is a lyricist of a different though scarcely less interesting genus. She is unusually brilliant; although hers is, for the most part, a congealed brilliance. The world she seems to inhabit is never unreal but it is a world of

sudden angles and cold corners. Emotion is not absent, but hers is often a passion frozen at its source; it glitters but it rarely glows. Her lines sparkle with the refulgence of sharp moonlight flashing on a field of ice. Strangely enough, in *Nets to Catch the Wind* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921) Blake is obviously Mrs. Wylie's model. But where Blake is innocent or naïf, Mrs. Wylie is carefully sophisticated; where Blake is fired with jagged visions, Mrs. Wylie's precision achieves an almost frigid ecstasy. This, it should be added, is no mean achievement. In an era of muddled thought and thickened speech, one should be grateful for the firm line; among a confusion of uncertain outlines one can scarcely overrate the artist who finds—and fills—his form. As a further addendum, it must be noted that the indebtedness to Blake does not bankrupt this poet of either her own ideas or her own diction. Poems as vivid as "Sanctuary," "The Church-Bell," "A Crowded Trolley Car," "A Proud Lady," display a dramatic keenness, an angular originality. Possibly the best example of her pointed gesture is the epigrammatic "The Eagle and the Mole," in which a didactic theme is given her own twist:

Avoid the reeking herd,
Shun the polluted flock,
Live like that stoic bird,
The eagle of the rock.

The huddled warmth of crowds
Begets and fosters hate;
He keeps, above the clouds,
His cliff inviolate.

When flocks are folded warm,
And herds to shelter run,
He sails above the storm,
He stares into the sun.

If in the eagle's track
Your sinews cannot leap,
Avoid the lathered pack,
Turn from the steaming sheep.

If you would keep your soul
From spotted sight or sound,
Live like the velvet mole;
Go burrow underground.

And there hold intercourse
With roots of trees and stones,
With rivers at their source,
And disembodied bones.

This love of edges sometimes suggests Emily Dickinson. But Emily Dickinson's firm delicacy was the result of emotion discovered, analyzed and restrained. In *Nets to Catch the Wind,* Mrs. Wylie's firmness seems to be the tight-lipped arresting of emotion too easily controlled. One of her sonnets begins significantly:

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones
There's something in this richness that I hate.

She loves bare hills, crystal cups, frost-bitten fields, landscapes "drawn in pearly monotones"; her favorite words, one imagines, must he "hard," "cold," "silver," "black," "scornful." She even writes of Beauty:

O she is neither good nor bad,
But innocent and wild!
Enshrine her and she dies, who had
The hard heart of a child.

But this tightening of feeling does not prevent Mrs. Wylie from escaping its limitations. She can write verses as lightly satiric as "The Prinkin' Leddie," as soft and almost silent as "Velvet Shoes," as fantastically decorative as "In-

cantation" (a remarkable lyric in blacks and whites), as subtly *macabre* as "Sea Lullaby," as musically suggestive as:

ESCAPE

When foxes eat the last gold grape,
And the last white antelope is killed,
I shall stop fighting and escape
Into a little house I'll build.

But first I'll shrink to fairy size,
With a whisper no one understands,
Making blind moons of all your eyes,
And muddy roads of all your hands.

And you may grope for me in vain
In hollows under the mangrove root,
Or where, in apple-scented rain,
The silver wasp-nests hang like fruit.

In *Black Armour* (George H. Doran Company, 1923), the beauty evoked no longer has "the hard heart of a child." There is a warmer wit here; a more fiery intellect. Even the headings of the subdivisions have a neat grace in the way they continue the figure of her title: "Gauntlet," "Helmet," "Beaver Up," "Plumes." Mrs. Wylie's craftsmanship reaches new levels in this volume; the strict rhythms and remarkable rhymes are a cumulative answer to those who blandly insist that free verse is the only medium for transmitting "modern" thought, Mrs. Wylie's psychological quatrains being more trenchant and introspective than most of the modernities of the boldest *vers librist.* Such poems as "Full Moon," "Three Wishes," "Heroics," "Self-Portrait," "Gifts at Meeting," are, apart from their content, individual in the swiftness and surety of their execution.

In these, and in others, she achieves a shower of technical brilliance, a flaring pyrotechnique. "Peregrine" is possibly the most illuminating example of this gift. The lines are

both brusque and fastidious, the rhymes acrid without being sour, the departures from the expected modulation skilfully managed. But "Peregrine" is something more than an exercise in adroitness; it is a crackling rondo, emitting ironic sparks as it rushes to its defiant end. Too long for quotation and too unified to break, this poem must be read in its entirety for its unique effect. Instead of dismembering it, I choose a briefer but equally revealing portrait which, in three short verses, is less of a *tour de force* but which establishes a complexity of meditation and background.

Now let no charitable hope
Confuse my mind with images
Of eagle and of antelope:
I am in nature none of these.

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
The little nourishment I get.

In masks outrageous and austere
The years go by in single file;
But none has merited my fear,
And none has quite escaped my smile.

It will be seen from these verses that Mrs. Wylie has lost none of her acerb vigor. But there are drops of pity and tenderness in her most caustic acidities. "Nebuchadnezzar" and "Little Sonnet" are more obviously appealing than Mrs. Wylie usually cares to be.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

My body is weary to death of my mischievous brain;
I am weary forever and ever of being brave;
Therefore I crouch on my knees while the cool white rain
Curves the clover over my head like a wave.

The stem and the frosty seed of the grass are ripe;
I have devoured their strength; I have drunk them deep;
And the dandelion is gall in a thin green pipe,
But the clover is honey and sun and the smell of sleep.

Occasionally Mrs. Wylie delights in erudite obscurities in which the associations are almost too special for cognizance, and without which the poem is meaningless. But even these instances have their succinct phrases. "Demon Lovers," in spite of its Eliot *pastiche,* has this incisive opening:

The peacock and the mocking-bird
Cry forever in her breast;
Public libraries have blurred
The pages of his palimpsest.

"Epitaph," "Fable" and "Cold-Blooded Creatures" are equally sure in their epigrammatic turns. The last of these three is particularly keen; Man, says this poet, thinks he alone is sentient

Of the intolerable load
Which on all living creatures lies,
Nor stoops to pity in the toad
The speechless sorrow of its eyes.

He asks no questions of the snake,
Nor plumbs the phosphorescent gloom
Where lidless fishes, broad awake,
Swim staring at a night-mare doom.

It is a cool hand with which Mrs. Wylie carves her metals and sets her colder jewels. But it is a nervous and sensitive mind which guides it; it knows the heat that has molded crystals and makes silver run like quicksilver. For all its lack of tremulousness, it has known the pulse of fever; it can feel,

behind a carnal mesh,
The clean bones crying in the flesh.

## JEAN STARR UNTERMEYER

THE pleasure of skating over thin ice becomes even more dubious when the skater is both critic and husband and the ice is the public work of his private partner. What should be the method of attack or, I had better say, the manner of approach? Let me plead simply and without circumlocution that being married to me makes Mrs. Untermeyer a relative only by marriage and that such a relation does not prevent her from being one of the country's least spectacular and most unusual lyricists. Like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Elinor Wylie, her first book revealed a complete personality with none of the tentative gropings that mark most initial offerings. Unlike these poets, however, Mrs. Untermeyer draws her power from the material of domesticity. It is essentially the problems of a woman's world which revives her ancient, Oriental heritage.

*Growing Pains* (B. W. Huebsch, 1918), is no otiose collection, but a thin volume of thirty-four full-flavored poems, the pruned fruit of eight years of slow creation. This highly critical quality does much to bring the volume to its high level; a severity of standards maintains the poet on the same austere plane. It is a passion for perfection, almost an intolerant passion which impels her. The first poem declares this in an illumination which lights up something more than her art.

### CLAY HILLS

It is easy to mould the yielding clay,
And many shapes grow into beauty
Under the facile hand.
But forms of clay are lightly broken;

They will lie shattered and forgotten in a dingy
corner.

But underneath the slipping clay
Is rock. . . .
I would rather work in stubborn rock
All the years of my life,
And make one strong thing;
And set it in a high, clean place
To recall the granite strength of my desire.

The volume brims with this earnestness. It is because her emotional reservoir is so deep that she does not have to pump up an emotion; she never gives a line the semblance of fervor by whipping it on. She has never, even for one poetic moment, driven a mood; she almost resents its driving her. Witness the title poem with its brusque apology and its terse conclusion:

I have left no songs for an idle lute,
No pretty tunes of coddled ills,
But the bare chart of my growing pains.

Underneath the candor of this volume, two things stand out: a condensed introspection and a concentration of epithet. This poet's gift for the arresting phrase and the exact word is everywhere, even in the first few pages. She speaks in a metaphor, evidently taken from the sewing-room, of a long country road as:

An endless piece of tawny silk, tacked down by trees.

In "Medicine" she rails against hypocrisy, "the bed-side manner of friends" and those who "come with crippling kindness." In "A Teacher" she draws a heedless and unhappy girl, stumbling over her scales and

giggling out her excuses
With the gauche coquetry of fourteen.

Intellect is always in the ascendency, even in the most ecstatic moments. It furnishes a running commentary and a self-criticism which, while often intensifying, is often inhibiting. In "A Man," she pictures herself as a child and expresses the whole psychology of our juvenile love of poor literature in two lines:

> A book held gaping on my knees,
> Watering a sterile romance with my thoughts.

This introspective power is revealed sharply in "The Bed," "Spring," "Alone," and the remarkably autobiographical "Clothes." A poem like "Birth," could only have been written by one who has an innocent joy in beauty and the bitter knowledge of its loneliness; "Deliverance" could have been produced only by years of gestation and a searching self-analysis. But this work is not only analytical. There are portraits here—"Sonya," "Church Sociable," "Caged" —dramatic projections as keen as anything in the volume. I quote the last of these with its pictorial poignance and power of epithet.

CAGED

I could almost see the heat curl
In grinning, evil curves,
Up through the narrow court.
And I flapped, on naked, slippered feet
Across the bare floor;
And sipped at something cool and drooped
kimonoed arms
With sick languor.

And then I saw you at your window—
You, with your damp grey face,
In your itching servant's black,
Your swollen fingers heavy on the sill.
You gazed dully at the caged canary
Songless on his sticky perch.

"Autumn" is similarly founded on the realities of the domestic scene; in this much-quoted celebration of housekeeping, Mrs. Untermeyer has achieved one of her most vivid pictures and, at the same time, one of her most passionate revelations. Here, she reproduces her early environment with a bright pungency; "Verhaeren's Flemish *genre* pictures are no better," writes Amy Lowell.

The chief fault with this poetry is its very sharpness of delineation; the images tend to become static. The desire to "work in stubborn rock" sometimes turns what should have been elusive and flowing into a too-precise and rigid figure. In its laconic speech and its hard clarity, it has much in common with the product of the Imagists. But, unlike most of their examples, this poetry burns with a personal warmth and a more actual contact with the world. Such a poem as the tiny "Moonrise" does what the Imagists so often attempt and so rarely succeed in doing—the establishment of a swift kinship between the most romantic and the most prosaic objects. "High Tide" is another poem which, in one extended metaphor, turns the mere fact of a physical law into an uplifted fantasy.

*Dreams out of Darkness* (B. W. Huebsch, 1921) has a richer musical undercurrent and a deeper interpretation of womanhood. Here is the same sternness, the same preoccupation with perfection, but the note is warmer, the inflection a shade happier. Even a casual glance reveals the blend of brilliant color and characterization in such poems as "Obligato to Brahms," "Blue Book—Route 121," "A Dead Nun Smiles at Two Poets," "The Passionate Sword," "Take Your Hand off my Throat, Beauty!" The very titles have a spontaneity of their own; they are, like the poems they preface, individual without straining for individuality.

So with this poet's introspections. She still hardens herself with an uncompromising relentlessness, but a new, half-

JEAN STARR UNTERMEYER

From a photograph
by Nickolas Muray

ironic tone creeps in, a whimsicality that is slily self-satirizing. There is something of both poignance and mock-resignation flickering through this volume—even in the unusual love song which she has called "Sinfonia Domesticia." I quote the last three verses from it:

For how with our daily converse, even the sweet sharing
Of thoughts, of food, of home, of common life.
How shall I be that glory, that last desire
For which men struggle? Is Romance in a wife?

Must I bend a heart that is bowed to breaking
With a frustration, inevitable and slow,
And bank my flame to a low hearth-fire, believing
You'll come for warmth and life to its tempered glow?

Shall I mould my hope anew, to one of service,
And tell my uneasy soul, "Behold, this is good."
And meet you (if we do meet) even at Heaven's threshold
With ewer and basin, with clothing and with food?

Technically, it is interesting to note that, whereas *Growing Pains* contained less than ten per cent of rhymed verses, the contents of *Dreams Out of Darkness* show more than half of the poems to be strictly rhythmical, organized pieces in rhyme. Not that her free verse has suffered; it still is an unusually flexible and suave medium as distinguished from the staccato attack of much contemporary *vers libre*. Yet the unrhymed verses have taken on a subtler music. In *Growing Pains,* the intellect was dominant; in this collection, melody struggles to be master. Sometimes both impulses are merged, as in "Lake Song" which, beneath its universal symbolism, is one of the most fluent unrhymed lyrics of the period.

LAKE SONG

The lapping of lake water
Is like the weeping of women,
The weeping of ancient women
Who grieved without rebellion.

The lake falls over the shore
Like tears on their curven bosoms.
Here is languid, luxurious wailing;
The wailing of king's daughters.

So do we ever cry,
A soft, unmutinous crying,
When we know ourselves each a princess
Locked fast within her tower.

The lapping of lake water
Is like the weeping of women,
The fertile tears of women
That water the dreams of men.

It is such poetry, to quote Joseph Freeman, which is "distinguished not only by the clear qualities of chiselled marble, not only by a music so melodious that some of her free verse pieces have to be read two or three times before their lack of rhyme becomes noticeable, but by the emotional fluidity of her thinking. . . . If women are, as Mrs. Untermeyer says, princesses each locked fast within her own tower, she at least has begun to unbolt the heavy doors of her prison with imagination." This imagination gives her the ability to translate the familiar in terms of the surprising. The reader is continually aroused by the combined fancy and accuracy of phrases like "gypsy-dressed zinnias—spinsters in masquerade," "sun-dyed tapestry of an apple-tree," "scythe-swing of the golden sun that swathes the whole world into a glittering bundle," "we walked languidly, with dragging Sunday feet," "trees that praised God by their symmetry."

And if "Eve Before the Tree," the longest and most ambitious poem in either collection, is a succession of impassioned flights rather than a unified cantata on the theme of woman's frustration in her efforts to achieve union through sex, it is because she has something in common with D. H. Lawrence, Anna Wickham and other literary flagellants. If she is too fond of hugging her own weltschmerz, too insistent upon wringing the last tearful drop from her almost drained agony, one is at least certain that there is something to drain. I turn to another poet for my cadence. "After all," writes Amy Lowell, "beautiful as Mrs. Untermeyer's forms often are, it is her thoughts that make the book. This is the heart of a woman, naked and serious, beautiful and unashamed."

# THE LYRICISTS—2

When one purposes to do justice to the male minnesingers of this period in America, one is confronted by almost as great a roster as is presented by the corresponding sisterhood. Each of a score of masculine singers has his admirers, quick to challenge, ready to spring in the arena and do battle with any bewildered editor who, through ignorance or omission, has confessed himself purblind to the adherent's pet enthusiasm. Why (I can hear the inquiry) are there no detailed studies of Alan Seeger and Joyce Kilmer? I answer, realizing their absence from these pages, that the various anthologies have fittingly enshrined these poets' one or two poems which have deserved their niche, and that death on the battlefield has cast a glamour over the names—a glamour which would not be increased by a critical examination of their work. But why (I can hear the chorus swelling) no tributes to Thomas S. Jones, Jr., Clinton Scollard, Robert Haven Schauffler, Louis V. Ledoux, John Myers O'Hara, Edward J. O'Brien, William Griffith, Harry Kemp, William Alexander Percy, Cale Young Rice, Clement Wood, Charles Hanson Towne, Charles Wharton Stork, David Morton, Willard Wattles, Dana Burnet and many others—all of whom may be found in Miss Rittenhouse's amiable anthologies? Again I plead the limitations of space and the need of personal preference. As in the case of the women lyricists, I choose—arbitrarily, perhaps—four men who, in their kinship and differences, must represent their neglected brothers.

## WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE outstanding feature of William Rose Benét's poetry is the fact that his lyrics have an unusually narrative quality and his ballads are intensely lyrical. Less apparent but equally characteristic is his mingling of realism and symbolism; he delights in interpreting the elemental through the incidental. A mystic with his feet firmly fixed in to-day. This is established even in his first volume, *Merchants from Cathay* (The Century Company, 1913) where Benét has already found his own manner. But his is no thin and sugary mysticism, no Maeterlinckéd sweetness long drawn out; it has a hearty and almost muscular power. The best examples of this mood are "The Anvil of Souls," with its robust swing, "Invulnerable" and "The Wrestlers." But it reaches its highest pitch in the thumping rhythms of the ballads where Benét is at his best. The title-poem is the epitome of this rollicking gayety. It opens in a crisp tempo:

> Their heels slapped their bumping mules; their fat chaps glowed.
> Glory unto Mary, each seemed to wear a crown!
> Like sunset their robes were on the wide, white road:
> So we saw those mad merchants come dusting into town.
>
> Two paunchy beasts they rode on and two they drove before,
> May the Saints all help us, the tiger stripes they had!
> And the panniers upon them swelled full of stuffs and ore!
> The square buzzed and jostled at a sight so mad.
>
> They bawled in their beards, and their turbans they wried.
> They stopped by the stalls with curvetting and clatter.

As bronze as the bracken their necks and faces dyed—
And a stave they sat singing, to tell us of the matter.

*"For your silks to Sugarmago! For your dyes to Isfahan!*
*Weird fruits from the Isle o' Lamaree!*
*But for magic merchandise,*
*For treasure trove and spice,*
*Here's a catch and a carol to the great, grand Chan,*
*The King of all the Kings across the sea!"*

Snatches like these shout from Benét's pages; they have the tone of Lewis Carroll's buoyant nonsense reset by Vachel Lindsay. Turn to a still earlier poem. Nine poets out of ten would have made "The Argo's Chanty" a wearisome list of forgotten incidents and half-remembered names. Given such a theme, they would have filled the lines with outworn classic phrases, routine images, Bulfinch's Mythology and dullness *ad lib.* Benét does nothing of the sort. He does not hesitate to use Greek names with the rest of them, but in his sharp measures they do not remain names; they take on ruddy flesh, they glow once more with the thrill of their shining adventure.

This vigor of utterance permeates most of Benét's work; it spurs his pen even when he is not engaged in the making of ballads. It surges beneath such quieter poems as "Paternity," the ironical and intricately rhymed "Remarks to the Back of a Pew"; the freshness of "His Ally," the tender strength of "Charms" and the fantastic "Morgiana Dances," in which swift movement is cleverly achieved. It makes us condone the instances where his borrowing is unabashed. His love for Keats and Browning is so intense that occasionally he cannot refrain from imitating them—even when he is conscious of it.

In *The Falconer of God* (Yale University Press, 1914) the athletic mysticism grows. And with it grows a more fantastic sense of color and image. Benét has the gift of evoking a strange and spicy music from a combination of seemingly casual words. Interesting as was his earlier work, there was, beneath the bluster and airiness, something over-studious; hovering above the fresh aroma of his poems one caught, not infrequently, a whiff of midnight oil, slightly rancid. Here, even the more scholastic attempts show a sharpened participation, a livelier increase of life. Take, for example, the title-poem of the new book. This has all of Benét's early glamour lifted to a plane of symbolism where it is sustained without ever being forced. These are the first two verses:

I flung my soul to the air like a falcon flying,
I said, "Wait on, wait on, while I ride below!
I shall start a heron soon
In the marsh beneath the moon—
A strange white heron rising with silver on its wings,
Rising and crying
Wordless, wondrous things;
The secret of the stars, of the world's heart-strings
The answer to their woe.
Then stoop thou upon him, and grip and hold him so!"

My wild soul waited on as falcons hover.
I beat the reedy fens as I tramped past.
I heard the mournful loon
In the marsh beneath the moon.
And then, with feathery thunder, the bird of my desire
Broke from the cover
Flashing silver fire.
High up among the stars I saw his pinions spire;
The pale clouds gazed aghast
As my falcon stoopt upon him, and gript and held him fast.

As more pointed instances of this broadening of perceptions there are the whimsical anger of "People," the *macabre* music of "The Cats of Cobblestone Street," and the revealing freshness that animates the rather ponderous learning in "The Schoolroom of Poets," where we see the great singers, not as laurel-crowned bards, but as boys in class—pinched little Chatterton oblivious of the rest, Francis Thompson mumbling scraps of Latin, Keats deep in the charms of Marmontel's *Peru*.

Some of the poems in this volume, some of the best poems, in fact, show an unfortunate tendency of Benét's—a tendency to be discursive and run on past the limitations of his themes. "The Land of the Giants" is a case in point. It is the sort of ballad that this poet writes so well, a blend of light whimsy and loud protest. G. K. Chesterton, in one of his "tremendous trifles," suggested that, since there are chanties for sailors, we ought to have a set of songs for shopmen, printers and bankers' clerks. In "The Land of the Giants," Benét has done an even more fascinating thing—he has written a marching song for reformers. But this ballad of Jack, the modern iconoclast, defying the ogres of tradition, would have been twice as appealing had it been half as long. Benét excels in the shorter poems where he can curb the prancing imagination that so often runs away with him; it is in the sonnet, where he is compelled to keep his restless steed curvetting inside the palings of fourteen lines, that he is most effective. Here his figures gain in definition and sharpness. In "The Pearl Diver" he speaks of

> . . . the bright, bare Day
> Like a tall diver poised above the surge
> Of ebony night,

that plunged through a spray of stars to pluck a filmy pearl

And held it high for earth and heaven to mark:—
The cold globe of the winter-shrunken sun.

Benét's next volume is composed of one long poem interspersed with lyric interludes. *The Great White Wall* (Yale University Press, 1916) differs somewhat in kind but not in color from his previous volumes. Here is the same extraordinary sense of whimsy, a wayward fancy and a deft juggling with the grotesque. None of his compatriots, with the exception of Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay and his own younger brother, has his *flair* for the decorative that verges on the diabolic. In the present work, he has lightly turned back a few centuries and lets us revel in the savage glitter of ancient China. True, there are times when, like Swinburne, Benét pulls his reader under as he sinks in a welter of flowing words and inundating figures; but he is a good swimmer, even in the roughest verbal seas. One pictures him, having just plunged through an especially threatening passage; his feet firm but swaying a trifle on the shore; his head thrown back victoriously, still dripping phrases like:

He razed the ramparts of Systan and smote the lords of
Badukshan,
Whose chepaval and shekaval, wild squadrons, he outrode.
Polonians, barbarians, Udecelains, Hungarians
He gripped and threw, and on to new and vaster triumphs
strode.

The poet is seldom as rumbling as this. Often he achieves, in the midst of such merely mouth-filling rhymes, a piercing lyrical note. His vivacity and his invention rarely flag; the end where terrible Timur sees his great defeat in the hour of his greatest triumph is a skilful, dramatic climax.

In *The Burglar of the Zodiac* (Yale University Press, 1918), the poet begins to let his fantastic Pegasus run away

and frequently unseat him. He seems either afraid or incapable of using the bit. The result is that often what started out as a canter among the stars ends in a scraping of shins on the pebbly earth. One watches this in such poems as the over-long allegory, "The Seventh Pawn," "The Quick-Lunch Counter" and "The Blackamoor's Pantomime." There are many times when the rhythms are badly cramped and the rhymes seem twisted out of joint.

But all the poet's earlier gifts are combined with new energy in the madcap title-poem, in "Films" (particularly the first and third reels), in the amusing "How to Catch Unicorns" and "The Horse Thief." This last is a prodigal and lively extravaganza. A desperate cowboy, crouching with coiled lariat in the mesquite, sees a snow-white horse, whose mane is mixed with moonlight and silver. He lassoos the bright mustang: the rope breaks; he manages to swing up and hold to its glittering mane. Then, as the horse springs from the earth, he hears "a monstrous booming like a thunder of flapping sails," the mustang spreads wings—and he realizes he has caught Pegasus! . . . But the first poem is also the best example of what Benét can rise to. Here is possibly less of the impudent, soaring vivacity, but more of a homelier vision. "The Singing Skyscrapers" has the rich combination of daring and nobility toward which Benét's work seems to aim. In the voices of the titanic buildings calling each other across the night, we hear a new sort of mysticism—one that, with its mixture of splendor and stridency, is wholly American. It is impossible to imagine such a conception coming from a graduate of Oxford. The fancy itself is inconceivable except from one to whom skyscrapers are as native as quick-lunch counters, crap-games, double-headers and Douglas Fairbanks—all of which make up the chief part of this volume. Here is a fragment from the initial poem:

*And from far to the South*
*I heard the Woolworth Tower*
*Reply from the sky:*

"Aye, cities of power,
Each a granite flower
Stamened to unfold
With towers of ivory,
Towers of gold,
Towers of brass
And towers of iron;
Towers as many as the hours that environ
The years of our servitude,
Our steel and iron yoke.
In the deep blue skies
They stand like smoke!"

*Perpetual Light* (Yale University Press, 1919) is a memorial to the poet's dead wife, a series of love poems which, in their very reverence, bar criticism. The first fourteen may be found in Benét's earlier volumes, but there are more than thirty new and lonely tributes. The dedication is especially moving; so is the concluding "Sealed," the sequence "After" and the verses which begin:

By her beauty stayed, by her love empowered,
*(Coward! Coward!)*
Take the honest light and pray for grace.
Where her lightning struck, where her presence flowered,
*(Coward! Coward!)*
Dare to see her face.

These are low melodies played on muted strings. And if some of the strains are over-delicate, they are no less emotional. "Delicacy," says Santayana, "is a finer means of being passionate."

*Moons of Grandeur* (George H. Doran Company, 1920) contains a little of Benét's worst and much of his best.

His worst is to be found in the excessively long monologues which, for all his exactitude of detail and precision of style, Benét fails to infuse with life. The Egyptian and Italian poems are well documented, shaped with an artisan's skill, but none of the characters seems to have the gift of concision and all of them talk in the same lengthy, lifeless monotone. The best of this poet is in the dramatic lyrics; in the splendid "Night," the *spiccato* "When the Caterer Sang of His Wedding," and the fantastic sonnets, one of which I quote by way of coda.

TRICKSTERS

I am bewildered still and teased by elves
That cloud about me even through city streets.
One sings a stave and one a dream repeats,
One, crueller, in some old resentment delves.
I am aware they are my other selves,
Yet to what dazzling vision each entreats,
Casting a glamour over shams and cheats,
Ennobling cant, buzzing by tens and twelves!

So when my smiling grieves the passerby,
I strut in all vocations not my own,
Wearing the centuries like a baldric slung;
Whilst shabby I gawk at this splendid I.
Chronos and Momus through my lips intone,
Archangels, heroes,—rascals yet unhung!

## STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

Stephen Vincent Benét, the younger brother of William Rose Benét, made his literary début as a schoolboy, *Five Men and Pompey* (The Four Seas Company, 1915) appearing when he was scarcely seventeen. In spite of the strong accents of Browning and more than a trace of Alfred Noyes, these dramatic portraits exhibit not only a precocious

facility but a surprising accomplishment. *Young Adventure* (Yale University Press, 1918) is still less the work of an infant prodigy; at twenty, the poet has attained his artistic maturity. The first poem ("The Drug-Shop, Or, Endymion in Edmonstoun") is the most ambitious though scarcely the most successful contribution to its contents: an attempt to picture Keats mooning among his pills and powders, in which the author makes the mistake of devoting, with a youthful foolhardiness, many of the seventeen pages to poems which he believes Keats might have written. "Young Blood" is a far more decisive piece of color, "Winged Man" has a rapid lift in its concluding tercets, "Portrait of a Boy" is a rare example of the interpretative dream in which the interpreter has a sense of humor. The first verse of "The Fiddling Wood" illustrates the younger Benét's vigor of description:

> Gods, what a black, fierce day! The clouds were iron,
> Wrenched to strange, rugged shapes; the red sun winked
> Over the rough crest of the hairy wood
> In angry scorn; the grey road twisted, kinked,
> Like a sick serpent, seeming to environ
> The trees with magic. All the wood was still.

In *Heavens and Earth* (Henry Holt and Company, 1920), which divided the Poetry Society Prize with Sandburg's *Smoke and Steel,* Stephen Benét, like his brother, is at his best in variations of the bizarre; he is happiest when running the scales from the brightly archaic to the lightly diabolic. Even in this vein, the growth in his style is remarkable; his phrasing achieves a new pointed animation, unusual without being stilted. He speaks of the moon shining

> . . . on gardened roofs like a white nut peeled of its husk.

And again, in a later poem, he says the moon is

. . . a spilling of milky sap from the sky
And the tree of the sky was a candle of creamy flame.

In the sardonic "Mortuary Parlours" the first and last couplets have a condensation of the *macabre* to an almost scientific finesse.

The smooth, unobtrusive walls say "Hush!" in a voice of honey and meal,
The refined and comforting chairs protest that sorrow may be genteel. . .
The windows smile with the smiles of masks, the curtains are specters walking,
And Death, the obsequious gentleman, comes rubbing black gloves and talking!

Perhaps the best example of this idiom is that poem which is a triumph of virtuosity, a *genre* poem rendered in the expressionist manner: "Boarding-House Hall," in which the story and its comments are set off not merely by the nicety of illumination but by the intrusion of the propulsive last line.

BOARDING-HOUSE HALL

First the stuffy upholstered smell of the chairs began
To puff a few sighs of dust, and the sticky-varnished
Reek of the cheap worn wood had a verse to scan
About Love and Death and Beauty, fly-spotted and tarnished.

"I never liked her at all!" said a green glass bowl,
And a wiff of anger whitened the broken plaster,
"Her eyes were too big!" cried a smell with paws like a mole.
"She was slinky," the pinks spoke. "Thin," creaked a broken castor.

"She was greedy. She never loved him. She powdered her nose."
Pale-calm as a specter's gem in the shadow-playtime,

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

From a photograph
by Harris and Ewing

The ghost of the perfume hid in her hair a rose
And shook dark wealth from its robes and possessed the
day-time.

Like a scented tree of Egypt it burgeoned above,
For a space of quiet like myrrh, for the flash of a feather. . .
They were still, who had seen the dead, happy face of love. . .
—And the smells of the onions trooped up the stairs together.

If I have stressed the singularity of Stephen Benét's métier, it is not because he is at home only in the limbo of picturesque distortions and verbal oddities. He can be as direct as a Bradstreet statement. The individualized sonnets are proof of this—particularly "The Trapeze Performer" (one of the most original of the many "sonnets on the sonnet"), "Operation," "Lunch at a City Club"—and several of the galloping lyrics. He can utilize the traditional harmonics with a refreshing clangor.

Roll your hands in the honey of life!
Kneel to your white-necked strumpets!
You came to your crowns with a squealing fife
But I shall go out with trumpets!

Poison the steel of the plunging dart.
Holloa your hounds to their station!
I march to my ruin with such a heart
As a king to his coronation!

Stephen Benét's gambits are particularly cocky and successful. This is the stimulating opening of "8.30 A. M. on 32nd Street":

*The wind sniffed like a happy cat*
*At scuttling beetle-people,*
*The sunshine would have roused a flat*
*To try and be a steeple.*

*My breakfast in me warm and staunch,*
*Your letter in my pocket,*
*The world's a coon that's climbed a branch*
*And I am David Crockett!*

And this is the keen first verse of "Flood-Tide," with its surge of youth:

Life went whistling a tune between the plum and the cherry,
Rolling a blossom of pink like almonds under his tongue,
Looked at us all as we grew, and made exceedingly merry.
"Lord! how I'll dibble and prune, when you aren't so beautifully young."

*King David,* which was *The Nation's* prize poem for 1923 (published in book form by Henry Holt and Company, 1923) is less distinctive; even the most sympathetic reader of this two-hundred-line ballad would be tempted to award at least half of the prize to Vachel Lindsay. In spite of the derivative tone, there are a few eloquent moments and one or two phrases as clean-cutting as

The days slipped by without hurry or strife,
Like apple-parings under a knife.

Stephen Benét has already published two novels and, since he believes that man cannot live by poetry alone, he is drawing closer to the demands of fiction. Already his verse shows evidences of overwork. It is too ready to accept the easy phrase, too willing to allow his ready rhymes to determine (and confuse) the progress of his images. But this is too early to attempt to chart his future. He has, at least, sufficient power to make his future his own.

## WITTER BYNNER

WITTER BYNNER is a poet whose work continually promises greater things than he has given. In the early *An Ode to Harvard and Other Poems* (Small, Maynard and Company, 1907) there were several hints of what one might expect; in *The New World* (Mitchell Kennerley, 1915) the possibilities were repeated and amplified. The latter is a series of uneven poems in which the poet's Celia acts as *das ewige weibliche* and draws him on to a vision of spiritual brotherhood.

It is with *Grenstone Poems* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917) that Bynner fulfils at least part of his promise. The desire for democracy, the same vision rising from his previous work, is here with a finer restraint. Bynner has found not only a sense of life, but a synthesis of it. Having found it, however, he keeps on discovering and rediscovering it with the same steady surprise and, unfortunately, almost the same speeches. This insistence on what, when first confided, was fresh and startling becomes redundant and unexciting when repeated some score of times. Bynner too often puts down what he thinks he ought to write rather than what he actually feels. The uplifted poems are obscured by much that is merely competent and often commonplace. There is little excuse for so many feeble verses on the order of "Lullaby," "A Grenstone Glade," "War" and "Responses," with its concluding bathetic quatrain:

> What can a man descry in us
> And so allow the lie in us? . . .
> The serpent and the dove in us—
> And O, the mother-love in us.

But against this we have the calm passion of "The Poet"; the dexterous charm of "Young Eden"; the sonorous music

of "During a Chorale by Cesar Franck"; the colloquial ease of "Train Mates," which begins:

> Outside hove Shasta, snowy height on height,
> A glory; but a negligible sight,
> For you had often seen a mountain-peak
> But not my paper. So we came to speak. . . .
>
> A smoke, a smile,—a good way to commence
> The comfortable exchange of difference!—
> You a young engineer, five feet eleven,
> Forty-five chest, with football in your heaven,
> Liking a road-bed newly built and clean,
> Your fingers hot to cut away the green
> Of brush and flowers that bring beside a track
> The kind of beauty steel lines ought to lack,—
> And I a poet, wistful of my betters,
> Reading George Meredith's high-hearted letters.

In a dozen places we find his early lyric power, although it is usually tuned to a philosophic lute; we have here the physical ascending to the plane of the metaphysical. Often, indeed, the rhapsodist becomes too publicly aware of the sacredness of his mission. We get the best and worst of this mood in such a poem as

GOD'S ACRE

> Because we felt there could not be
> A mowing in reality
> So white and feathery-blown and gay
> With blossoms of wild caraway,
> I said to Celia, "Let us trace
> The secret of this pleasant place!"
> We knew some deeper beauty lay
> Below the bloom of caraway,
> And when we bent the white aside
> We came to paupers who had died:
> Rough wooden shingles row on row
> And God's name written there—*John Doe.*

There are occasions, and not a few of them, when Bynner tosses off a natural and skilfully modulated song with fluency. Frequently he reaches the high notes of poetry without effort or gasping for breath. And, though there are instances where the spirit of "The Shropshire Lad" overpowers this poet, he has a spirit of his own. Witness "Lest I Learn," or "The Dead Loon," or "To No One in Particular," or "To a Phœbe Bird," or this melodious movement called

CHARIOTS

I never saw the morning till to-day;
I never knew how soon night went away—
Day merely came a regular event;
Night merely went. . . .

Now day and night are chariots for me,
Since I have learned their mystery from you:
Day holding one and moving solemnly—
Night holding two.

*The Beloved Stranger* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1919) exhibits Bynner on the double trapeze accompanied by a troupe of trained epigrams which leap blithely through the air at regular intervals—and miss their marks with equal uniformity. In spite of his natural grace, Bynner himself flounders into attitudes, one more ungraceful than the other. He tries too often and too hard, and the effort is distressingly apparent. "See how far I can bend," he seems to say, "without losing my balance"—and thereupon topples awkwardly to the sawdust. When Bynner appeared in the ring masked in his Spectric disguise (as related in a previous chapter), he was wildly successful; when he attempts a similar clowning without make-up, the spectators turn to the livelier and more authentic freaks. In *Spectra,* if I may take my metaphor out of the circus, his *alter ego,* Emanuel Morgan, pulled the

wool over eyes that should have seen better. Encouraged by the blindness of his audience, the author of *The Beloved Stranger* looks about for fresh victims. In rhyme and in unrhymed free verse, Bynner draws a straight face and proceeds to declaim some of the best modern nonsense verse in a tone as smoothly serious as an undertaker's.

I CHANGE

I wonder how it happens
    I was made
A foe of agate
    And a friend of jade,

Yet have become,
    Unwisely I'm afraid,
The friend of agate
    And the foe of jade—

So that I wish, by dying,
    To be made
Careless of agate,
    Careless of jade.

Moreover, one has the feeling that possibly Bynner has taken most of these Delphic utterances in pontifical earnest. These suspicions are half confirmed by "Weariness," "The Boatmen," and "The Blue-jay."

I who look up at you
Am a blue-jay
Crested,
And my only way
Of saying to you,
My sky,
That I have wings of your color
Is—
Clang!

And one turns to the following revelation with a kind of joy which is scarcely the sort to gratify the poet. This is "I Evade" in its entirety:

> The look in your eyes
> Was as soft as the underside of soap in a soap-dish . . .
>
> And I left before you could love me.

The hoax, if it was a hoax, failed; it was too elaborate and too obvious. The public was still gullible but, having been once bitten, was twice shy. The mask, the posturings, the oracular absurdities deceived no one with the possible exception of the author. In *Spectra,* the masked poet had the laugh on his readers; in *The Beloved Stranger* the joke was on Mr. Bynner.

*A Canticle of Pan* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1920) is the culmination of Bynner's gifts. Several of the new poems still seem like sounding-boards which echo the tones of almost every other poet except the composer of them. But when Bynner does not try to sound the gamut of modern poetry, from the lyrics of A. E. Housman to the attenuated epigrams of Ezra Pound, he can strike his own note with clarity and precision. "In Havana" is a brief example. So is the dancing "Property." It is in these condensed lyrics that Bynner comes into his own; in "Vagrant," "The Tree," the suggestive "Grass-Tops" and the well-known "Voices," which is appropriately dedicated to Sara Teasdale.

> O there were lights and laughter
> And the motions to and fro
> Of people as they enter
> And people as they go. . . .
>
> And there were many voices
> Vying at the feast,
> But mostly I remember
> Yours—who spoke the least.

## JOHN HALL WHEELOCK

In 1911, before the poetry produced in America had reached the proportions of a "renaissance," there appeared one of the most remarkable "first books" of the period. It was *The Human Fantasy* (Sherman, French and Company), and its author was an unknown by the name of John Hall Wheelock. What gave the volume its peculiar distinction was the way it suggested the spirit of Whitman with the voice of Henley. But what gave it its authority were the overtones that rose from the strangely assembled chords; a singing buoyance, a lyricism that was both tender and intense. On the first page of this arresting book, one was confronted by a freshness not only of idiom but of vision. *The Human Fantasy* was one of the earliest contemporary contributions to our rapidly growing literature of exalted realism; it celebrated, with passionate vigor, "the glory of the commonplace." It is a wide-sweeping love of existence which carries Wheelock beyond much of his work which is merely shouting and repetitive. It is a lavish exuberance which makes him rejoice in "the dear, sensual Fact of things," in

> The carnal buoyance and the common sense
> Of sane and sensual humanity,

and allows him to write, as an initial affirmation:

> The vastitude of space comes down to your own door,
> Equally with the stars; the common and the street
> Are part of the great Beauty that shines from shore to shore.
> The universe divine lies around us at our feet—
> Tangible, made of dust, and holy to the core.

Not in a world beyond lies wonder, nor above,
Nor throned among the spheres, nor set for days to be—
Over you and beneath, whether you sleep or move,
Reaches the moral Fact, the starry Eternity—
And all the hell of hate and all the heaven of love. . . .

Before your generation and you go hurrying by,
Have you no word for all, of pure and starriest breath!
O, how the common doom transfigures Destiny.
In the dear thought of all who pass through life and death,
Splendid it is to live and glorious to die.

"Splendid it is to live and glorious to die"—this might be the motto of *The Human Fantasy*. It shines out of all the poems, even the more obviously youthful and overstressed verses. And it rises, with little diminution of power, from "Midnight Down Town," "Sunday in the Park," "Noon," "Shop-Girls," "The New Christs," "A Portrait," "Old Women," "Whistles at Night" and this graphic:

MEMORIES OF THE CITY

The sound of the organ-grinder here by the dunes,
With the bright sea and beaches all around,
Wakes in my heart a melancholy profound;
The wheezy melodies and old, cracked tunes
Have a remembered sound.

I seem to feel the city's roar again—
The Park, the benches, the electric light
Far down the pavement burning cold and bright,
The avenues and winding parkways, when
The trees are black with night.

The sidewalks in their empty loneliness;
And just beyond tall buildings, dark and dread,
With one star visible when you turned your head,—
Your laughter and your gaudy little dress
And all the words you said.

In the full noontide quivering and quick,
'Mid all this beauty splendid and supreme,
How pitiful these tawdry memories seem,
Like a forgotten perfume, faint and sick,
Or faces in a dream.

Alas for dreams that wander under heaven,
Old, futile memories of the foolish years,
Full of ridiculous old hopes and fears,
So sordid and so commonplace, not even
Tragic enough for tears!

It is a spiritual intimacy which transmutes Wheelock's reflections of reality. In his affection for "the lovable, sordid humanity . . . careless and brave, divine at the core," this poet has something of the vision which uplifts sensuality and enough of the realist's passion to save mysticism from cloudiness by humanizing it. Sometimes his exultations overleap themselves and the poem becomes a welter of uneven lines and inchoate music. Frequently his rhapsodic eagerness extends his verses into verbosity. He depends too much on his pack of adjectives; in an effort to invest old phrases with new glamour, he overuses such combinations as "dear and ridiculous," "tawdry, pathetic," "sane and sensual" (a particular favorite of Wheelock's). He even employs, again and again, such outworn poetic platitudes as "fierce and flaming suns," "luminous heavens," "the boundless blue," "radiant loveliness," "vague alarms" and others of a similar, worn-down rubber stamp. But, even at its worst, *The Human Fantasy* is an amazing first offering. At its best, it has that translated realism which is the color of life. The following lyric, in spite of its trace of Henley, has this high distinction.

SUNDAY EVENING IN THE COMMON

Look—on the topmost branches of the world
The blossoms of the myriad stars are thick;
Over the huddled rows of stone and brick
A few, sad wisps of empty smoke are curled
Like ghosts, languid and sick.

One breathless moment now the city's moaning
Fades, and the endless streets seem vague and dim;
There is no sound around the whole world's rim,
Save in the distance a small band is droning
Some desolate old hymn.

Van Wyck, how often have we been together
When this same moment made all mysteries clear,—
The infinite stars that brood above us here,
And the gray city in the soft June weather,
So tawdry, and so dear!

In Wheelock's second book, *The Belovèd Adventure* (Sherman, French and Company, 1912), there is a slight dilution of the strain so prominent in the initial volume; the repetitions of thought and phrase are more marked. There are times when the poems, animated by nothing so much as sheer high spirits, seem boyish rather than buoyant. A more careful grouping and a judicious use of the blue pencil would have improved the newer collection, particularly the love-songs in the manner of Heine and the mood of Symons. As it is, they set the others in bolder relief. The opening section, "Sea Poems," is particularly charged with the alert music that surged in his city poems. Witness "Along the Dunes," "September by the Sea," "A Hymn from the Beaches" and "By the Pavilion."

It is interesting to turn, as an illustrative contrast, to the dramatic poems in "Irma," to the narrative of the old Psalmist and the virgin Shunamite in "The Last Days of King

David," to the tenderness of "To No. 42 Who Declared He Was the Christ," "Nirvana," or this snatch of unrhymed cadence:

> The old, familiar Beauty
> Caressed by the world's dead hands,
> Beauty, so old and weary,
> Beloved of a thousand lovers,
> Worn with a thousand kisses,
> Surprising—beneficent—holy—
> Comes to us all in the end.

An example of how Wheelock has taken an old rhetoric and an older music and has given them character is in the verses of the following poem. Nothing could be less individualized than the languor and lilt of his "Serenade"; and yet here is a *nuance* that is Wheelock's own. These are the first few stanzas:

> The stars are out, and the heavens are silent and very deep!
> My heart was wakeful and wild, and hungry to be with the stars,
> I rose and came to thy window; but thou, my beloved, sleep.
>
> Sleep, though my heart be wild and wakeful and full of unrest;
> The crickets are still, and the breezes creep in at thy window, sweet:
> Thy right arm is under thy head, and thy left lies over thy breast.
>
> Sleep till the wind be dead and the stars swoon out of the skies,
> The world is full of laughter and weeping and passionate prayer;
> More soft than the night on the waters are thine eyelids over thine eyes.

The succeeding volume, after such splendid performances, is a bulky disappointment. Wheelock had evidently, for the time being, written himself out; instead of resting, he threw

JOHN HALL WHEELOCK

From a photograph
by Danford Barney

himself into the production of mere quantity. In *Love and Liberation* (Sherman, French and Company, 1913) he has poured repetition on repetition, sugar on treacle, beauty on banalities. The mere mathematical sum of the verses is staggering. There are two hundred and eleven pages in the book and the first one hundred and sixty-seven are devoted to lush lyrics (mostly two on a page) where the sentimental string is often tuned as flatly as:

> Let me open to the Beauty
> Of your being all my breast,
> Life and longing, soul and body,
> Arms, lips, eyes, and all the rest!
>
> Drink deep draughts in all around me
> Of your beauty, drink and drain
> Deep draughts of yourself around me,
> Love and loveliness and pain!
>
> Give myself to you completely,
> Wholly and beyond recall—
> Joy and sorrow, soul and body,
> Life, and love, and song, and all!

Such incredible stanzas are, alas, not uncommon in this collection. Even where the verses are far less banal, the effect is that of monotony long drawn out. Ten solid sections of love-songs—over two hundred and thirty none-too-varied variations on the amatory lute! The most versatile poet, turning out such a stream of rhymed ecstasies, would be likely to repeat himself. And this Wheelock emphatically does. To be accurate, he repeats himself repeatedly. The information that love is "terrible and strange" loses most of its thrill when the fact is dogmatically insisted on, with such trifling changes as "terrible and sweet," "holy and terrible," etc. One is also likely to become wearied of Wheelock's continual "liberal and well" reiterations, of his perpetual

"whirling" of the poet's hair in "the wind of the morning," of his pathetically pathetic fallacies, and most of all of a maddening omnipresent and capitalized "Beauty" which is thrust forward at least once on every page.

This inability to reject what is third-rate and merely space-filling almost ruins *Love and Liberation.* And one cannot easily excuse the silly affectation of giving the volume so childish a subtitle as "The Songs of Adsched of Meru." The absurdity is too apparent; its exoticism is too home-grown. The only foreign thing about the volume is its very heavy and very German indebtedness. Many of these lyrics read like second-rate paraphrases of the least successful of Schubert's *lieder;* most of them seem to be poor translations of songs that Heine never wrote. For example:

> I would that I were a flower
> That encloses forevermore
> The "You" and the "Me" together;
> One in the deep heart's core.
>
> The lover and the beloved
> She bears in her breast alone,
> Inextricably interwoven,
> Deep in her breast made one.

Sometimes, indeed, the pale resemblance to Heine grows stronger and is recognized in something besides a series of clumsy inversions. There is even a poem in this volume which starts "Out of my sorrow I have made this song," which inevitably recalls Heine's *"Aus meinen grossen Schmerzen mach' ich die kleinen Lieder,"*—and recalls it much to Wheelock's disadvantage.

These incomprehensible inclusions with their quantitative errors in technic and judgment not only make *Love and Liberation* seem an unworthy successor to its forerunning volumes, they conceal, by their very bulk, the dozen or so

really excellently fashioned poems. The patient reader will find, half-buried in the midst of bathos, such a burst as:

> Lift your arms to the stars
> And give an immortal shout;
> Not all the veils of darkness
> Can put your beauty out!
>
> You are armed with love, with love,
> Nor all the powers of Fate
> Can touch you with a spear,
> Nor all the hands of Hate.
>
> What of good and evil,
> Hell and Heaven above—,
> Trample them with love!
> Ride over them with love!

*Dust and Light* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919) contains a little of the earlier vitality, but only a little; one looks in vain for the rich, human stuff of another "Sunday Evening In the Common." It would be pleasant to write that what Wheelock has lost in realistic magic he has gained in a lyric romanticism. But an examination of *Dust and Light* forbids any such agreeable conclusion. The singer who gave promise of being one of our most poetic interpreters of modern life has here become a dispenser of musical platitudes, a determined (and sometimes inspired) chronicler of the tid-bits of poetry. He buries his best effects in what seems to be a mass of carefully-hoarded juvenilia; he blurs his clean images with a thick film of *clichés* like "dizzy draught," "rude buffet," "languid breath," "wanton waste," "fall like dew," "move like music," "sounding shore." In addition to these disappointments, the faults of his early work are intensified. He is uncritically repetitious; he thins out his themes till they seem the merest trickle of ideas; the continual and upper-case "Beauty" of *Love and Liberation*

is replaced by an overcapitalized "All," varied by an equally imposing "Awe."

These defects mar but they cannot utterly destroy the power of Wheelock's convictions. If *Dust and Light* contains some of this poet's least distinctive efforts, it also includes some of his most successful ones. The two long poems at the end of the volume are among the noblest verses Wheelock has achieved. "Thanks from Earth to Heaven" and "The Far Land" vibrate with his old certainties. And "Earth," in spite of its reminders of Blake and Ralph Hodgson, is the book's climax. This is its simple but eloquent beginning:

> Grasshopper, your fairy song
> And my poem alike belong
> To the deep and silent earth
> From which all poetry has birth;
> All we say and all we sing
> Is but as the murmuring
> Of that drowsy heart of hers
> When from her deep dream she stirs:
> If we sorrow, or rejoice,
> You and I are but her voice.
> Deftly does the dust express
> In mind her hidden loveliness,
> And from her cool silence stream
> The cricket's cry and Dante's dream:
> For the earth that breeds the trees
> Breeds cities too, and symphonies.
> Equally her beauty flows
> Into a savior, or a rose—
> Looks down in dream, and from above
> Smiles at herself in Jesus' love.

*The Black Panther* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922) contains the best of Wheelock. His flashing athleticism matures into a steady fervor; the passionate exulting grows into an exaltation of passion. Almost every poem, with the excep-

tion of a few innocuous songs, reveals this spiritual increase. Particularly notable are the opening "Night Has Its Fear," the grave music of "Andante," the long sweep of "The Fish Hawk." The metaphysical gropings of the earlier volumes find their way here and reveal their passage to the reader in a vivid light. The mystic rises above his own rhapsody (and, incidentally, above his romanticisms) in poems like "Blind Players," "The Lion House," the extended organ tones of "The Divine Fantasy." In these poems, particularly in the last-named, the poet has expressed the paradox of conflict and consent: the philosophy of the single Consciousness which reconciles terror and tenderness, murder and laughter, dawn and destruction—"Life, the dreadful, the magnificent." All Consciousness is One, is Wheelock's answer to the hopeless riddles, the brutal contradictions of existence: "The worm's death is in the sparrow's song." This is the gathering cadence of what, from every consideration, is Wheelock's most important work:

> Life, whose sole splendor in red slaughter spills
> The blood of its own breast; in many wills
> Wars on the one Will; and in wrath or dread
> Feeds on itself and, on itself being fed,
> Shines forth in song and color; gilds the dress
> Of the green-fly; and pours its loveliness
> In rapture on the earth; in theaters
> Of crowded congregation sits—nor stirs—
> Watching itself, itself the spectacle.

*The Black Panther* is, physically, the smallest of Wheelock's volumes. But, irrespective of the number of pages, it is—with the possible exception of *The Human Fantasy*—his largest accomplishment.

# THE RHAPSODISTS

ANY account of the Rhapsodists would have to start with a record of their frank indebtedness to Whitman. Not only is their reflection of his form more obvious than that of any other group, but they are closer to his elemental spirit. When, at the advent of the twentieth century, the blaze of new tendencies caught up and destroyed the clutter of mouldy routine and wooden formalism, poetry was the first of the arts to spread the rejuvenating flame. Poetry was already prepared for the bright flood; in a sense, it had helped to prepare it. The gilt and tinsel erotics, the romanticism that began with an air of delicate artificiality and ended with an air of indelicate futility, the over-nice concern for half-tones, fastidiousness, preciosity—all these vanished when the "barbaric yawp" of Whitman swept like a fiery wind "over the roofs of the world." The nostalgic airs were hushed; the decadent lispings of Wilde, Symons and their feeble transatlantic imitators were drowned in that full-throated utterance. Poetry was not only revived, it was regenerated.

Whitman left no immediate heirs. Horace Traubel, a microscopic Boswell, attempted to communicate the large rapture, but his was merely a record of vanished greatness; one heard little beside his master's voice. It was not only the Puritanic reticence that frowned on rhapsody. The Anglo-Saxon, as a race is conspicuously uncomfortable in the presence of declared emotion; he regards with distaste as well as distrust what any Latin or Oriental accepts with-

out a tremor. He has always looked askance at the frank celebrant of life and turned his virtuous back on the unashamed rhapsodist. This antipathy, which retarded the progress of *Leaves of Grass* by forcing it to go through the muck of prurience, has impeded those who have tried to bring Whitman's vision to bear upon the new conditions. For a while, it seemed that his influence would be dissipated through purely æsthetic channels, that his call for freedom would be answered by an argument about form. But his interpreters have increased as much in power as they have grown in numbers. Carpenter in England and Bazalgette in France have presented, through critical lenses, new revelations of his vista. And, here in America, three totally different personalities, springing from as many races, have carried creatively Whitman's philosophy to its social, and even psychical, conclusion.

## JAMES OPPENHEIM

Oppenheim's first book (*Monday Morning and Other Poems,* Sturgis & Walton Company, 1909) was, like most first volumes, a tentative affair. But even a casual reading disclosed a personality struggling beneath self-imposed limitations. Almost all of the poems in the volume are in formal meters, and Oppenheim is not at his best, not wholly himself, in the strict forms. The utterance is cramped, the freedom tethered and the message is caught in its own coils. Or rather, if I may change the confining metaphor, it is coughed out between fits of stammering and gusts of eager eloquence. The very force of his earnestness carries his purpose through such word-choked and awkwardly rhymed poems as "New York, from a Skyscraper," "The Ice Cream Saloon," "Monday Morning," "The Cry of

Man," and makes "Saturday Night" (the most successful of the rhymed pieces) triumph over its barrel-organ rhythm.

But even in this early collection, there are plenty of evidences that Oppenheim realized he was not one of those who profit by the restraints of the stanza, who are actually set free in the confines of rhyme and a fixed rhythm. Already there are signs of dissatisfaction with the precise meters, experiments in *vers libre,* efforts to give his emotion deeper channels. One sees him groping in uncharted rhythms, stumbling through the wordiness of such free-rhyming attempts as "Morning in Central Park," saving himself from many a slippery passage in "The Marriage-Hymn" and finally striking a sure stride in "The Lincoln-Child."

In *Songs for the New Age* (The Century Company, 1914) the uncertainty has disappeared. The stammering has gone, the consonantal jars, the uncouth dissonances have resolved, and we are listening to a speech developing a music that is strangely Biblical and yet (or perhaps I might better write, and therefore) native. It is an individual speech; it is Oppenheim; and it is the expression of an ancient people reacting to modernity, of a race in solution. In a sense this poetry is a flare-back; it runs through forgotten centuries and brings buried Asia to busy America. It adds the gift of prophecy to pragmatic purpose; it has the power of summoning the creative past as well as evoking the uncreated future. It is this that clothes Oppenheim's colloquial words with ancient dignity and makes them echo the simplicity and strength of many of the Psalms; it relates them with something more than blood-relationship to such Oriental outbursts as the Book of Job. It is this Semitic enthusiasm, this racial ecstasy that makes *Songs for the New Age* a unique contribution to American literature.

This volume, like all of Oppenheim's subsequent work, is something more than a book of poetry. It is a slow searching that goes on beneath the musical and literary surface of all the poems; an attempt to diagnose the twisted soul of man and the twisted times he lives in. Plainly influenced by the discoveries of Freud and Jung, it attempts to express in poetry what the former has done in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and the latter in *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*. But it is no mere translating of these studies into "polyrhythmical" lines; it is a dithyrambic celebration of life conditioned by a knowledge of how vainly and how vapidly most men live. In this work Oppenheim reveals the world-conflict within one's self; it is an attempt to assemble the elements of gigantic struggles and synthesize them. The poem "We Dead," in the first section, is the crux of the volume; it is its eloquent argument. It is a passoniate protest against the stolidity and indifference of man, against dull acceptance, against a method of existence that has not even dared its greatest possibilities. It is impossible to suggest by any part of this poem the passion of it, but I take a fragment ruthlessly to indicate the mood:

We dead! awake!
Kiss the beloved past good-by,
Go leave the love-house of the betrayed self,
And through the dark of birth go and enter the soul's bleak weather. . . .
And I, I will not stay dead, though the dead cling to me.
I will put away the kisses and the soft embraces and the walls that encompass me,
And out of this womb I will surely move to the world of my spirit.
I will lose my life to find it, as of old,
Yea! I will turn from the life-lie I lived to the truth I was wrought for;

And I will take the creator within, sower of the seed of the race,
And make him a god, shaper of civilizations . . .

Now on my soul's imperious surge,
Taking the risk, as of death, and in deepening twilight,
I ride on the darkening flood and go out on the waters
Till over the tide comes music, till over the tide the breath
Of the song of my far-off soul is wafted and blown,
Murmuring commandments . . .

The book is divided into three sections: "We Dead,"—the burden of customs and fears under which we sink far too willingly; "We Living,"—the welter of passions, the struggle through uncertain conflicts out of ignorance; "We Unborn,"—the release to the infinite potentialities of life. Here is a modern singer speaking in the tones of an ancient prophet who can revile and promise in the same breath. And it is the prophet, speaking with the authority of the poet, who can say of "Priests":

Priests are in bad odour,
And yet there shall be no lack of them.
The skies shall not lack a spokesman,
Nor the spirit of man a voice and a gesture . . .

Not garbed nor churched,
Yet, as of old, in loneliness and anguish,
They shall come eating and drinking among us,
With scourge, and pity, and prayer.

In a less exalted but even more fiery speech, we have the old Isaiah note in such a poem as:

THE SLAVE

They set the slave free, striking off his chains . . .
Then he was as much of a slave as ever.
He was still chained to servility,
He was still manacled to indolence and sloth,

He was still bound by fear and superstition,
By ignorance, suspicion, and savagery . . .
His slavery was not in the chains,
But in himself.

They can only set free men free . . .
And there is no need of that.
Free men set themselves free.

Poems like "Patterns," that harsh denunciation, or "The Clinging Arms," or "A Handful of Dust," are further evidences of this religious universality.

It may be well to pause here for a moment and consider one of the main objections to this type of poetry in general and to Oppenheim's in particular. The objection is that it tries to teach something, to embody a message. This, it is claimed, is a betrayal of the true functions of art. The artist, cry the literary bourbons, should not try to prove anything; his sole business is to see, to record or create beautiful and precious things. The growth of a democratic spirit disturbs these patricians. They forget that the art of the people is growing faster and deeper than genteel art; that the personal feeling which has its roots in religious passion is the dominant force of most great work. Every artist has dared to polish and edit the crude manuscript of life; he is, at his best, a kind of religiously inspired proofreader. It has become increasingly evident that the artist is an unusually sensitive medium; sensitive not only to what he looks at, but what looks at him. And as all art is a human activity, a glorified communication, the artist (projected, let us say, by the subconscious need of the race) desires most deeply to give expression to what the world most deeply needs to have expressed. So art becomes not a mere specializing of perceptions but a sharing of life. It is this communism of experience that we find not alone in the best poetry of our day but in the great art of all

time. It explains the fact that the artist can be both Apollonian and Dionysian; that he can be at one time the actor on the stage, the prompter in the wings and the critic in the first row.

This opposition to the "art for art's sake" theory comes with particular force from Oppenheim as a Jew. Few Jews have ever lived who did not regard themselves as the bringer of a message and their art but the instrument to make it heard. The Jews' business, ever since the days of Abraham, has been religion, and the art that embodied it has been correspondingly social. They have come to consider themselves not only a peculiarly favored race that persists through (and even thrives on) prejudice and persecution, but, with a naïve faith in their destiny, have taken it for granted that they were sent abroad to be teachers and pathfinders. Even so lyric a poet as Heine wrote "Poetry to me has always been a divine plaything. . . . And if you would honor me, lay a sword rather than a wreath upon my coffin—for I was ever a fearless soldier in the war for the liberation of mankind." What is all the stupendous music of the Old Testament but a glorification not so much of God but of what is godlike in man? It is the confirmation that David sought; it is in the angry thunders of Jeremiah, it prompts the rich and sensual imagery of the Song of Songs, it impels the lashing questions and the majestic answers in the Book of Job.

It is this blend of fiery dissatisfaction, sublime assurance and deep ironism that keeps the Jews what they were; that makes them doubt and disbelieve all things and believe somehow in everything. So it is natural that a Jew (one of the race that was both a Godmaker and God-breaker) should again unite in poetry the old iconoclasm and still older worship. In the work of Oppenheim the marriage of religion and science is celebrated. Here one sees no placid,

intangible Jehovah, but a God working among men; the toiling Infinite, the Deity in overalls. Oppenheim rejoices to see the Creator struggling toward man's salvation, and incidentally His own. This rejoicing reaches a fine verbal sonority that Whitman did not often surpass. Timbrels and psaltery are in these lines. But they are not used only to rouse to fresh victories or warn us from slothful defeats. Sometimes a flute is added and we have music (as in "Sky Lover" and "The Flocks") as poignant as some of the Psalms; it takes the Hebraic chants themselves to surpass such a brief snatch as "The Tree" or

THE RUNNER IN THE SKIES

Who is the runner in the skies,
With her blowing scarf of stars,
And our Earth and sun hovering like bees about
her blossoming heart?
Her feet are on the winds, where space is deep,
Her eyes are nebulous and veiled.
She hurries through the night to a far lover . . .

I cannot end a consideration of this volume without attempting to appraise the concluding ten-page poem which, upon separate reading, is an involved and apparently abortive effort to describe infinity. But "We Unborn" is only baffling when examined apart from its context. Taken as a climax, it becomes an illuminating summing-up, a triumphant *résumé*. No other poem in the volume is filled with imagery so grandiose; none is so complete a synthesis.

I have digressed somewhat to establish the reason why Oppenheim's next book of poetry was received with even greater coolness than the preceding. *War and Laughter* (The Century Company, 1916), an equally rousing volume, is full of vehement protests and a splendor that is no less lovely for being sometimes an angry loveliness. Again there rose the cry of "too much exaltation." And again the

objectors failed to realize that they were complaining not only because Oppenheim was exalting life but because he was appraising it. It was once more the contradictory Semitic strain that misled them: the queer blend of delight and disillusion; the quality that hates the world with its shams and double-dealing and still loves it exuberantly. This attitude is sharply defined in the revealing "Greed," with its wrangling disputation; it points the irony of "Report on the Planet, Earth"; and it reaches its consummation in "Laughter," which, beginning with a monologue on the solemn fish in the aquarium, grows into a passionate hymn of creation. The poet has learned that laughter spurs and saves the world; it will heal humanity even though man as yet sees only the broadly comic aspect of its trivialities. But Oppenheim has the vision of a day when humbug and hypocrisy will not only be detected, but destroyed by a shattering laughter. He sees the time when nothing will be able to stand against its devastating blows; even to-day, he observes, the earth has dared to be happy beneath the horror and turmoil of a world gone mad. In the water-filled trenches, Death is mocked by a joke; war will end in a shout that will be like a monstrous laugh set free.

This affirmative gayety pervades "Golden Death," with its sweeping bacchanal; it winks through "Immoral"; it brings the tragically colored "1914—and After" to a noble close. It adds its tonic brightness to the love-songs that open the volume and lifts its corrective voice in a dozen satiric little pictures of which the sharpest are "A Funeral" and this incisive:

PORTRAIT OF AN INVESTIGATOR OF VICE

His nails were perfect:
They were well-trimmed, shining and regular;
But under each was a spot of dark dirt.
In those nails I saw the man.

I am far less enthusiastic about the group of poems that are obviously written around the theory of psychoanalysis. They are half-failures not only as poetry but as interpretations. These renderings of the Oedipus complex, the "terrible mother," and the mechanism of introversion are too remote to be real. But what is more serious a fault, they seem merely a set of arbitrary symbols arbitrarily set down; scientific jargon repeated rather than translated. They have come too directly from Oppenheim's reading rather than indirectly out of himself; they seem to have been produced without sufficient gestation. Such poems as "The Centaur," "The Gray Mothers," "Woods," show too determined an effort to "interpret" this new leap of science, too conscious a desire to contribute to its growing literature. "Steps of the Sky" and "The Encircling" are unintelligible to any one except the students of Jung and Freud—and of questionable value to them.

Fortunately, these aberrations are rare. In the next volume, *The Book of Self* (A. A. Knopf, 1917), Oppenheim is still over-concerned with valuations of analytic psychology, but the preoccupation is less obtrusive. The only portion that is imperfectly fused is the second section ("The Song of Life"), where the translations are pseudo-scientific, the struggle too smoothly managed. It is a cross between a warmed-over myth and a morality play lost in a theory. The first section, however, is a generous recompense. Here is a series of self-criticisms for all selves; brief, acerbic, caustic. Never perfunctory, always probing, these lines frequently reach depths we may have suspected but seldom cared to explore; they direct a sudden shaft of light into chasms and dark corners that we thought were hidden.

But it is the concluding section that is the climax and even the cause of the volume. This symbolic poem, half-dream,

half-drama, is an attempt to summarize the history of man—and it almost approximates the impossible. In "Creation," whose motto is "He who finds himself, finds humanity," Oppenheim goes back to the beginnings of time to discover the undiscoverable secret.

Throughout the prologue Oppenheim has attained new colors and a strange brilliance that impress one even more than its philosophic content. There is an enriched music in the choral passage that begins:

Who buried Atlantis
And devoured Egypt?
Into what jaws has Athens gone?
Galley-slave and Agamemnon, the great king, are shoveled under,
And the girl that combed the hair of Helen is dust with her golden mistress . . .
Cities of great pride, with their multitudes,
Have gone down,
And Spring, that called out the boy Dante into the streets of Florence,
Silent when Beatrice walked,
Opens wild roses in the ruins over the dead . . .
The snows where Saga heroes fought
Melted with those warriors,
And the desert girls of Arabia are only a song and an echo in our brains . . .

The same great war; the same great urge: the same birth and death . . .
Are kisses sweeter than in Carthage?
Is failure more bitter than on the hill of Gethsemane?
Has death lost its sting since Rachel?

Whither goes the pageantry and the vision-clouded army?
Dust—flame: dust—flame . . .
Out of a cry, silence . . .
Out of silence, a cry . . .

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JAMES OPPENHEIM

These lines reveal Oppenheim's fullest power—and his greatest defect. In his effort to show the vast continuity of existence, to reveal life as a progression of old pageants, a revivifying of the past, he is apt to fall into the habit of cataloguing, of depending too much on glamorous names. The name of Helen of Greece, for instance, is not merely a symbol to him; it is an obsession. Thus he frequently flies back to the very maternal past from which he is so anxious to escape. "Away from the Mother!" he cries, clinging to her skirts for a last poetic embrace. And away he runs, only to return with startling regularity to repeat the same rebellious slogan.

In *The Solitary* (B. W. Huebsch, 1919), the note is deeper and more somber. The long poem, "The Sea," is the book's peak; apart from the daring of its conception, one is moved by the sheer surge of its syllables, by the rise and fall of its irregular but fluent rhythms. The same fervor leaps in "The Fires of Pittsburgh," breathes through "Memories of Whitman and Lincoln," and springs up with a new vigor in "Song of the Uprising." There are, I must add, several motes in Oppenheim's work if not in his vision. He is still inclined to run on into loquacity, to ramble past the natural limits of his theme. Evidences of influences as yet unassimilated are also here. "Summer Night" reads like an unconscious tribute to Carl Sandburg; the line-divisions in "Mist," "Silence" and "The Rainbow" are as disturbing as they are arbitrary. But these inconsistencies do not mar the major content of *The Solitary* which is brought to a splendid finale by the one-act symbolic drama "Night," one of the poet's highest notes.

*The Mystic Warrior* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) is an autobiography in free verse. Beneath its personal disclosures, it is an effort to ascertain the contradictory position of the artist in a mechanistic society; to find out if it is

possible for the neurotic visionary to make anything but a superficial adjustment to life. That Oppenheim has chosen to tell this puzzled story of freedom and failure in *vers libre* is a natural development. It is not only in line with his own experiments which he began with *The Beloved* (mistakenly printed as a prose narrative) and continued in the allegorical *The Book of Self,* but it is the result of a general tendency to compress the novel, to take the efflorescence of details and by distillation extract their essence.

The first part is a thirty-page poem which serves both as prologue and exposition of the main theme. It is a full-length portrait of the artist as seen by himself, a painfully subjective study in introspection. Even as autobiography, it is an unusual performance. For autobiography as we know it is a self-censored affair; one of the reasons for the distortions being that "only the famous write autobiographies that are read, and the famous cannot afford to tell the petty truths about themselves." Here, however, is an absence of self-glorification that does not lead to the equally distorted attitude found in so many confessions: a sentimental and falser self-abasement. The chief figure emerges, weak, groping, swung violently from self-contempt to enormous confidence; a figure drawn with little pride and not too much pity.

The second section of the volume is the richer illumination: the story becomes objective, the reactions (and many of the same scenes) are now shown as events in an actual world. Although the Whitman tradition is followed in form, the spiritual emphasis of *The Mystic Warrior* is almost the opposite of *Leaves of Grass.* Whitman's is the light; this is the shadow. The Whitmanic mood is the mood of sweeping affirmation, of a never-sated ecstasy of acceptance. It is America saying Yes! at the top of its voice.

But there is another mood of America that may be submerged but is not uncharacteristic of its inarticulate hungers. It echoes the spirit of Hamlet, of Raskolnikoff, of Hawthorne, of Poe—the spirit unable to rejoice in reality, unable to respond to the demand for yea-singing. This volume, with its plea for the sensitive and self-conscious artist, is a picture not only of a type but of a period; in its portrait of the same character from two opposed angles, this double exposure (I use the word in more than its photographic sense) is unique in our poetry.

*Golden Bird* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1923) is a return to Oppenheim's loquacious mysticism; it is an elaborate rather than an eloquent love poetry that suffuses the greater part of the volume. Here, again, the very past from which this poet has admonished us to escape is too much for him. He cannot speak of his loved one without recalling to us an entire galaxy of perished beauty: we are asked to thrill once more at the mere mention of Nausicaa, Juliet, Magdalen, Joan of Orleans and (Oppenheim evidently suffers from a Hellenic complex) the inevitable "dark Helen." The diction is tenuous, the imagery a repetition of figures which the poet has employed often and more effectively in his other works. Even as psychoanalysis, especially from one who has been an occasional practitioner, the style is naïvely limited. Parts of the last section redeem the insistently sexual images, and "Hebrews" rises from the soft superlatives like a battle-cry hurled from a rose-garden.

It is the vibrancy of "Hebrews," too tense to be uttered except in its entirety, which distinguishes the voice of Oppenheim. The best of his volumes have this creative discontent; a challenge that rouses us against the armies of the torpidly living and the complacently dead. We are not only warm blood and dry bones, his poetry declares, "We are flesh on the way to godhood!"

## ARTURO GIOVANNITTI

The poetry of Giovannitti rouses the problem of the relations of art and propaganda. Is Art, as many have claimed, cramped and distorted by the message? Or is the message weakened by Art? The answer, I believe, lies somewhere between the two replies demanded by the interrogations of the two factions. Bad art is, to that extent, bad propaganda. And vice versa. Much of the greatest literature (and, when one thinks of the countless Madonnas and the hundred of oratorios, one might include painting and music) has been religious propaganda. Impelled by the desire to achieve a nobler humanity, to discover a higher God, works like "Paradise Lost," "The Divine Comedy," and the Bible itself succeed in combining great art with an equally great message.

The propagandist in Giovannitti sometimes plays traitor to Giovannitti, the poet, but in his longer poems the balance is nicely adjusted. Here he echoes the blind hunger of great masses, a deep, growling note which has been little heard in American poetry. It is strange that this theme should have been expressed with such force by one who was almost a stranger to the English language. Yet even as a child in Italy, Giovannitti had dreamed of America and had "learned upon the knees of his mother and father to reverence, with tears in his eyes, the name of the republic."

This is not the place for an analysis of Giovannitti's political views or his economic theories. But they must be considered, no matter how sketchily, since they form not only the background but the impetus of his poetry. The old clash between employer and employed, the tragic enmity between labor and capital, the terrible hypocrisy of "law and order" in many of our mining camps, the absurd fiction of

free speech maintained by a "kept" press—these are matters which concern the man so deeply that they have forced the poet to speak and, so speaking, to violate the æsthetic canons: to write verse which has something to "teach" and which, in spite of this, is poetry. I have said that the class-war, with its agonies of brutality and injustice, is his background; it would have been truer to say it is his battleground.

When Giovannitti came here in 1900 at the age of seventeen, with the dream of America as the great liberator in his heart, he was disillusioned and disheartened. What he first saw, through the eyes of the laborer, was the whiplash and legal trickery of the possessing classes; the few ruling the many; a vast conglomeration of helots driven by half a dozen masters. He worked for a time in the Pennsylvania coal mines, sharing the disappointment of many who had come to this country, urged by the same promise of liberty that had drawn him here. In 1906, he joined the Socialist movement, because he believed in the power of its protest as well as in its constructive program. Later he became the editor of the Italian radical paper, *Il Proletario*. Always he was being driven on by the vision of a united humanity, a fraternal solidarity not only of the laborers but of all who rendered service The only things he hated were degradation, theft, chicanery; the only men he fought were the smug reactionaries who contributed nothing to the world but their sense of superiority. For his connection with the great strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, he spent several months in jail on a false charge. He opposed tyranny at home and abroad with an intensity unparalleled by any of our writers; all he has written, whether in the form of pamphlets or poems, has been done in "an effort to express a multitude of men lost in an immensity of silence."

All this energetic courage is evident on the first page of Giovannitti's *Arrows in the Gale* (Hillacre Bookhouse, River-

side, Connecticut, 1914) and Helen Keller's eloquent introduction gives it additional emphasis. She enters with illuminating detail into the purposes of the "discontents" and their challenging idealism; she traces the growth of Giovannitti's relations with the Syndicalists. But it is her praise of the poet that is most revealing. Toward the end she writes, "He makes us feel the presence of toilers hidden behind tenement walls, behind the machinery they guide. He turns the full light of his intense, vivid intelligence upon the worn faces of the workers who put every breath and nerve into the struggle for existence, who give every hour and exhaust every faculty that others may live. He finds voice for his message in the dumb loves and hopes, the agonies and thwartings of men who are bowed and broken by the monster hands of machines. . . . He welcomes the combat—not a combat that shall rend the world apart, but one which shall bring it together in an universal sunshine of peace." That this is something more than enthusiastic rhapsody may be proved by the most casual glimpse through the volume. It is given an added emphasis by "The Cage," with its rough music and its rougher mixture of terror and jubilance; few poems produced by this generation are more honest, more heart-rending.

It will be seen at once by those interested in the technic of verse, how admirably Giovannitti's lines shape themselves to his subjects. Unlike Whitman's in structure, they share the same freedom of gesture, the same uplifted kind of realism. Sometimes, with all their fierce sincerity, they grow too strepitant and didactic, as in "Samnite Cradle-Song" and "Utopia," which fizzle out in a rhetorical anti-climax. But these lapses are infrequent; in this volume the heights are not only attained, they are maintained. Giovannitti's intensity rarely descends to what is factitious or glib; it strengthens the elemental stuff in "The Last Nickel,"

"The Sermon on the Common," "The Praise of Spring."

The volume owes its defiant eloquence to the cumulative effect of its poems more than it does to any one poem. Yet there is one restrained outcry that, were it surrounded by nothing but mediocrity, would mark the volume with a brilliant blood-red stamp. As a personal document of a man in prison, it is unrivaled even by *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.* I refer to "The Walker." As an art-work, it is one of the most remarkable things our literature can boast. But it is something beyond that. It is a poetic epitome of a creed, a movement that is both political and religious. It is impossible to give an idea of its tense and concentrated force by quotation; it is seven pages long and the poem gains force with every passage. But even at the risk of committing a crime against art, I reprint an excerpt that may give some idea of the mood as well as the mechanics of "The Walker."

I hear footsteps over my head all night.
They come and they go. Again they come and they go all night.
They come one eternity in four paces and they go one eternity in four paces, and between the coming and the going there is Silence and the Night and the Infinite.
For infinite are the nine feet of a prison cell, and endless is the march of him who walks between the yellow brick wall and the red iron gate, thinking things that cannot be chained and cannot be locked, but that wander far away in the sunlit world, each in a wild pilgrimage after a destined goal.

. . . . .

Throughout the restless night I hear the footsteps over my head.
Who walks? I know not. It is the phantom of the jail, the sleepless brain, a man, the man, the Walker.
One-two-three-four: four paces and the wall.
One-two-three-four: four paces and the iron gate.

He has measured his space, he has measured it accurately, scrupulously, minutely, as the hangman measures the rope and the grave-digger the coffin—so many feet, so many inches, so many fractions of an inch for each of the four paces.

One-two-three-four. Each step sounds heavy and hollow over my head, and the echo of each step sounds hollow within my head as I count them in suspense and in dread that once, perhaps, in the endless walk, there may be five steps instead of four between the yellow brick wall and the red iron gate.

But he has measured the space so accurately, so scrupulously, so minutely that nothing breaks the grave rhythm of the slow, fantastic march.

When all are asleep (and who knows but I when all sleep?) three things are still awake in the night: the Walker, my heart and the old clock which has the soul of a fiend—for never, since a coarse hand with red hair on its fingers swung for the first time the pendulum in the jail, has the old clock tick-tocked a full hour of joy.

Yet the old clock which marks everything, and records everything, and to everything tolls the death-knell, the wise old clock that knows everything, does not know the number of the footsteps of the Walker, nor the throbs of my heart.

For not for the Walker, nor for my heart is there a second, a minute, an hour or anything that is in the old clock—there is nothing but the night, the sleepless night, the watchful, wistful night, the footsteps that go, and footsteps that come and the wild, tumultuous beatings that trail after them forever.

This contagious passion never deserts him. We hear it in his rushing battle-cries, in his ironic soliloquies, even in the toil-haunted love-songs. It is such a fusing of beauty and purpose as upsets our standards and rears one of its own. And if Art cannot make room for the message, it is more than likely that Art will be uncomfortably crowded by a force at least as strong as itself.

## CHARLES ERSKINE SCOTT WOOD

Charles Erskine Scoot Wood has had an extraordinarily varied career. He served in the United States Army for ten years, was in the Bannock and Piute campaign in 1878 as first lieutenant, studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1884 and published his first book in 1901, a collection of myths of the North American Indians. Although he has written several other volumes—among them a sequence of excellent sonnets—the essence of his life is condensed in the one volume for which he is best known. It is not a work which parades its radicalism, it has no pretensions, nothing but its own clean vigor and heightened vision. The book is made up of only one poem, which is little more than a dialogue between a poet and Truth—a not too enticing scheme of argument. But this setting, which in the hands of most contemporaries would have quickly descended into an elaborate and dull symbolism, grows wider as the poem proceeds. Wood, with a social consciousness as intense as Giovannitti and a far greater command of language, is by turns violent and tender, soothing and incisive, florid and brusque. And under the most rhapsodic passages surges the directness of his passion. This is how *The Poet in the Desert* (published by the author in Portland, Oregon, 1915; revised edition, 1918) begins his volume with a description of the great American desert:

She is a courtesan, wearing jewels,
Enticing, smiling a bold smile;
Adjusting her brilliant raiment negligently,
Lying brooding upon her floor which is richly carpeted;
Her brown thighs beautiful and naked.
She toys with the dazzlery of her diadems,
Smiling inscrutably.

She is a nun, withdrawing behind her veil;
Gray, subdued, silent, mysterious, meditative, unapproachable.
She is fair as a goddess sitting beneath a flowering peach-tree, beside a clear river.
Her body is tawny with the eagerness of the Sun.
And her eyes are like pools which shine in deep canyons.
She is beautiful as a swart woman, with opals at her throat,
Rubies on her wrists and topaz on her ankles.
Her breasts are like the evening and the day stars;
She sits upon her throne of light, proud and silent, indifferent to her wooers.
The Sun is her servitor, the Stars are her attendants, running before her.
She sings a song unto her own ears, solitary, but it is sufficient.
It is the song of her being. . . .
She is like a jeweled dancer, dancing upon a pavement of gold;
Dazzling, so that the eyes must be shaded.
She wears the stars upon her bosom and braids her hair with the constellations.

This is not the speech one might have expected from Wood after reading the sharp and racy prose of his ironic "Heavenly Discourses," which caused no little sensation when they appeared in *The Masses.* But there is no less sharpness and an even deeper ironism in the colloquies between Truth and the Poet that form the greater part of the volume. Observe this impassioned outburst, a complete poem in itself, with its controlled glorification:

I will not sing the ecstasy of the mother's birth-pang
Till Birth be free as Death;
Nor will I voice the nobility of Motherhood,
Till all motherhood be noble as Life itself.
I will sing a song of Bastards,
The free children of free mothers . . .
Oh, noble company of bastards,
Beloved of great Nature,

You are her petted children, born of her own desire;
She has given you the stars for playthings and taught the winds
to bring you offerings;
She has said to the sun these are your brothers, and to the
moon these are your sisters;
She has lain close to you in your secret cradle and has whispered
to you all the music of the unknown sanctuaries and has
dangled before your eyes the pictures of the undiscovered
world.
For you she has woven wreaths of bay
And has crowned your brows with laurel;
She has not delayed your coming for a priest's incantation;
Nor held back the mystery of your creation
Till the State give its consent.
She has not branded "Bastard" on your smooth, soft palms,
Nor on the pink soles of your little feet.
The great Mother is ignorant and indifferent
That you are baby breakers of the Law,
And she laughs scornfully at the laws of the Rulers.
She has set her own brand upon your souls,
And has given you place in the glorious company
Of poets, musicians, painters, declarers of knowledge,
Governors and captains, seers and conquerors;
William the Bastard, of Normandy,
And Alexander Hamilton,
And the Great Deliverer, standing alone,
Sad; silent; rugged; like a storm-beaten spruce
On a seaward cliff, melancholy; misunderstood of men,
And infinitely patient.

And here in the midst of fervor and pain is a startling flash of sunrise:

The lean coyote, prowler of the night,
Slips to his rocky fastnesses.
Jack-rabbits noiselessly shuttle among the sage-brush,
And, from the castellated cliffs,
Rock-ravens launch their proud black sails upon the day.
The wild horses troop back to their pastures.

The poplar-trees watch beside the irrigation-ditches.

Orioles, whose nests sway in the cotton-wood trees by the ditch-side, begin to twitter.
All shy things, breathless, watch
The thin, white skirts of dawn.
The dancer of the sky,
Who trips daintily down the distant mountain-side
Emptying her crystal chalice.
And a red-bird, dipped in sunrise, cracks from a poplar's top
His exultant whip above a silver world.

It is a volume of contrasts but not of contradictions. The poem runs true to its theme: the disgust of tyranny, the opposition to hypocrisy; a bitter challenge to injustice is what impels these lines. I know of no more powerful protest than the passage in which Wood vehemently assails the slave-making machine, unless it is the one in which he ridicules the sapience and governing instinct of man. Here is a related fragment:

As a little child winking in its cradle,
I gaze up at the roof she has put over me;
I see it frosted with sparks of eternity.
It is forever beyond my finger-reach and beautiful beyond my comprehension.
I do not seek to control it.
Yet I seek to control the soul of my brother,
Which also is inaccessible, infinite, beyond my comprehension.
I find no flaw in the marching of the worlds;
The unseen gathering of the crystal dew,
Or the raging of the relentless sea.
The glow-worms, which bear their lamps humbly,
As perfect as the sky-flooding moon.
The tempest which tears the rooted pillars of the world,
Not different from the wanton winds
Which negligently play their airy flutes upon the leaves.
Yet I instruct my mother.

Always, in spite of his disillusions, he is moved by the hope of the greater man, by the dream of a race that lives not by codes and restrictions, but by the natural laws of

beauty; a world existing beneficently in self-directed order, in a state of sublimated anarchy. This desire for a new system of things, for an unfettered but instinctively controlled freedom, prompts every mood. It sways Wood, whether he deals with the considerations of the State, or of a piece of fruit, or a celebration of self, or bastards, or the mockery of the stars, or profiteers, or the soft hiss of rain on summer leaves, or a graphic recollection of a round-up of an Indian encampment.

Passion and poetry—they are fused here. The fact that Art has again been invaded by a social force, and that it has yielded to a new influence without losing its own potency, is proved once more by this work. Wood never falters in his dual allegiance; rhapsody uplifts and glorifies his purpose. This blend grows more powerful as the poem comes to its triumphant climax; it reaches the heights of prophecy as it concludes:

The victims of the God of Gold
No longer march into his blood-dripping maw.
Their faces are set toward Death.
Their breasts are naked.
They have beaten their hammers and saws into knives.
Their eyes are fixed. They are willing to die.

Death is their drummer, drumming
Upon the unknown graves of the oppressed.

At the front of the terrible army flaunt two great standards,
Writhing like giant dragons above the sea of gray faces.
On one is written, "Justice";
On the other, "Freedom."

They are written in blood.

The final sentence describes Wood's own lines. They rise from depths of a great emotion. They are written in blood.

# THE TRADITIONALISTS

If undue preference has been shown in these pages for the exponents of new tendencies it should be acknowledged that the conservative and reactionary poets far outnumber them. Although the latter may seem as symmetrical in the use of their material as their designs, they themselves might be divided into three general groups: the ultra-conservatives, the traditionalists, the liberals. This quarter of a century has been particularly uncomfortable for the first of these. The ultra-conservatives have seen their inversions swept away; a decade or two has been rudely at work among their prettily derived phrases, their artificial diction, their vaguely gesturing sentimentalities. But the period has been even more difficult for the so-called liberals. Bound by a natural love for the established, the "liberal" poet conducts sporadic flirtations with the untried; clinging with a tremulous faith to the old gods, he offers up an occasional furtive sacrifice to new idols. Thus his work seems torn by an inherent reverence for rigid standards and an illicit desire for unfettered novelty. The result is an uncertain and usually half-hearted conflict in which neither impulse predominates; a battle without a victory, a struggle in which no one is defeated but the reader.

Such poets have been caught in strange currents which have first lured and then engulfed them. Uneasy in their conservatism, they have grown to be dissatisfied traditionalists. Vacillating between a romanticism of which they have grown tired and a realism which they distrust,

they falter, unable to choose either one and lacking the power to combine both. We see this indecision in the restless voluminousness of John Curtis Underwood, in the *sotto voce* radicalism of Percy Mackaye, in the disturbed academic fluency of Cale Young Rice, Hermann Hagedorn, William Aspinwall Bradley, and others.

The work of the true traditionalists is of a different order. It does not respond to every shift in poetic fashions, but the principles of its expression are more firmly founded than those of the tentative seekers after novelty. A poet like Santayana avoids stereotyped thought with the same instinctive distaste that the more experimental craftsman has for stereotyped speech. In the work of the outstanding six which I have chosen, it will be seen that the new forces have not altogether destroyed the old traditions, that, whatever the form, personality achieves its own expression.

## GEORGE SANTAYANA

It is indisputable that Santayana's alert style finds its keenest expression in his prose and it is probable that time will classify the author of *The Life of Reason* as a philosopher rather than a poet. But no account of the traditional note in American poetry can afford to neglect Santayana's *Poems* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923) which Santayana himself selected from his various works, including some of those written as early as 1883. The author's preface is eloquent and disarming. But it is much more than an effort to forestall criticism; it is, by application, an absorbing *apologia* for this type of poetry disguised as a personal confession. With a true understanding of the creative fire and with a humility that is never false, Santayana writes: "Of impassioned tenderness or Dionysiac frenzy I have nothing, nor even of that magic and pregnancy of phrase—

really the creation of a fresh idiom—which marks the high lights of poetry. Even if my temperament had been naturally warmer, the fact that the English language (and I can write no other with assurance) was not my mother-tongue would of itself preclude any inspired use of it on my part; its roots do not quite reach to my center. I never drank in childhood the homely cadences and ditties which in pure spontaneous poetry set the essential key. I know no words redolent of the wonder-world, the fairy-tale, or the cradle. Moreover, I am city-bred, and companionship with nature, those rural notes, which for English poets are almost inseparable from poetic feeling, fail me altogether. Landscape to me is only a background for fable or a symbol for fate, as it was to the ancients; and the human scene itself is but a theme for reflection. Nor have I been tempted into the by-ways even of towns, or fascinated by the aspect and humors of all sorts and conditions of men. My approach to language is literary, my images are only metaphors, and sometimes it seems to me that I resemble my countryman Don Quixote, when in his airy flights he was merely perched on a high horse and a wooden Pegasus; and I ask myself if I ever had anything to say in verse that might not have been said better in prose."

And yet, he tells us, the thoughts that prompted his verses could not have been translated in any other form. If their prosody is worn thin and traditional, as Santayana suggests they are, it is because he chooses such forms in the belief that the innate freedom of poets to hazard new forms does not abolish the freedom of all men to adopt the old ones. "Here is the uncertain hand of an apprentice, but of an apprentice in a great school." The first two sections, comprising fifty sonnets, reveal the method and the man. This, the penultimate sonnet, is typical:

GEORGE SANTAYANA

From a drawing
contemporary with the Sonnets

After grey vigils, sunshine in the heart;
After long fasting on the journey, food;
After sharp thirst, a draught of perfect good
To flood the soul, and heal her ancient smart.
Joy of my sorrow, never can we part;
Thou broodest o'er me in the haunted wood,
And with new music fill'st the solitude
By but so sweetly being what thou art.

He who hath made thee perfect, makes thee blest.
O fiery minister, on mighty wings
Bear me, great love, to mine eternal rest.
Heaven it is to be at peace with things;
Come chaos now, and in a whirlwind's rings
Engulf the planets. I have seen the best.

Here are all the shibboleths of this school. The fourteen lines seem a careful complication of trite similes, hackneyed verbal associations: "grey vigils," "sharp thirst," "perfect good," "ancient smart," "haunted wood," "fiery minister," "mighty wings," "eternal rest." And yet, in spite of the banality of these *clichés,* the sonnet attains a spiritual dignity. There is, as Santayana says of the couplets of Pope and Dryden, a certain elevation in this diction; "a pomp as of a religious procession, without which certain intuitions would lose all their grace. Borrowed plumes would not even seem an ornament if they were not in themselves beautiful. To say that what was good once is good no longer is to give too much importance to chronology"—which is a neat epigram, though a debatable point.

In another sonnet, Santayana has allowed an equally revealing and personal utterance.

ON A VOLUME OF SCHOLASTIC PHILOSOPHY

What chilly cloister or what lattice dim
Cast painted light upon this careful page?
What thought compulsive held the patient sage
Till sound of matin bell or evening hymn?

Did visions of the Heavenly Lover swim
Before his eyes in youth, or did stern rage
Against rash heresy keep green his age?
Had he seen God, to write so much of Him?
Gone is that irrecoverable mind
With all its phantoms, senseless to mankind
As a dream's trouble or the speech of birds.
The breath that stirred his lips he soon resigned
To windy chaos, and we only find
The garnered husks of his disusèd words.

If these poems have no higher value (and, aside from their faded verbiage, I believe they have), they are significant for showing Santayana's philosophy in the making. And if Dobson's famous "Ars Victrix" is a much sharper version of the same lines which Santayana has translated from Gautier, and if several of the poems creak and totter on the stilts of rhetoric, the spirit of his verse is the same that animates his precise and delicate prose. His poetry is a somewhat tarnished mirror in which one can find reflections of a suavely disciplined but fanciful mind.

## GEORGE STERLING

George Sterlng has little of Santayana's austerity. Sterling's rhetoric is high-pitched, strepitant, unrestrained; a flamboyance that finds expression in the very titles of his volumes: *The Testimony of the Suns* (1903), *A Wine of Wizardry* (1908), *The House of Orchids* (1911), *The Binding of the Beast* (1917). The long poems are full of oratorical trumpets; they move to such brassy declamations as:

Shall augury his goal impart,
Or mind his hidden steps retrace
To mausolean pits of space
Where throbs the Hydra's crimson heart?

Ephemeral, may Life declare
What quarry from the Lion runs,
And sways the inexorable suns
Where gape the abysses of his lair?

It is a glittering and archaic vocabulary on which Sterling depends; too often his theatrical effects are conjured up by clouds of polysyllabic adjectives and the repetition of such epithets as "abysmal flame," "firmamental gloom," "darkened vastitude," "warring voids," "long passion-swoons," "leprous moon," "Night's primordial realm." In one quatrain (the last of "The Swimmers"), he can employ three such rumbling classicisms as "evanescent," "immeasured," "immaculate."

For on those sands immaculate and lone
Perchance They list the sea's immeasured lyre,
When sunset casts an evanescent fire
Thro billows thunder-sown.

But Sterling is not always so prodigal with his pomposities. In his *Selected Poems* (Henry Holt and Company, 1923), many of the shorter poems are more controlled if not quieter. Of its *genre,* the last of the three sonnets on Oblivion is characteristic.

THE DUST DETHRONED

Sargon is dust, Semiramis a clod!
In crypts profaned the moon at midnight peers;
The owl upon the Sphinx hoots in her ears,
And scant and sere the desert grasses nod
Where once the armies of Assyria trod,
With younger sunlight splendid on the spears;
The lichens cling the closer with the years,
And seal the eyelids of the weary god.

Where high the tombs of royal Egypt heave,
The vulture shadows with arrested wings
The indecipherable boasts of kings,
As Arab children hear their mother's cry
And leave in mockery their toy..they leave
The skull of Pharaoh staring at the sky.

Occasionally Sterling speaks in a less vociferous pitch; there are times when he allows a mood to sing itself without forcing his note or intensifying the *timbre.* "The Last Days" is one of the most successful of these simpler moments; a calm rhythm that flows gravely to its calmer conclusion.

Days departing linger and sigh:
Stars come soon to the quiet sky;
Buried voices, intimate, strange,
Cry to body and soul of change;
Beauty, eternal, fugitive,
Seeks the home that we cannot give.

Such couplets, less dazzling than the gaudy imagery of the more orotund stanzas, have more chance of surviving. It is when his ornate tropes cease trying to impress us, that Sterling is most impressive. "The Black Vulture," his best as well as his best-known sonnet, emphasizes his ability to be forceful without the strained extravagance.

THE BLACK VULTURE

Aloof upon the day's enormous dome,
He holds unshared the silence of the sky.
Far down his bleak, relentless eyes descry
The eagle's empire and the falcon's home—
Far down, the galleons of sunset roam;
His hazards on the sea of morning lie;
Serene, he hears the broken tempest sigh
Where cold sierras gleam like scattered foam.

And least of all he holds the human swarm—
Unwitting now that envious men prepare
To make their dream and its fulfilment one,

When, poised above the caldrons of the storm,
Their hearts, contemptuous of death, shall dare
His roads between the thunder and the sun.

## WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD

William Ellery Leonard possesses a more concentrated vigor. *The Vaunt of Man and Other Poems* (B. W. Huebsch, 1912) and *The Lynching Bee* (B. W. Huebsch, 1920) are full of an insurgent fire. Traditional in form, these volumes are anything but conservative in tone. The spirit of protest sings through the earlier volume; the title-poem of the latter is a burning indictment in which the poet's sense of outrage ascends in white irony. There is nobility in these pages—even the anger is a noble anger—a fortitude that gropes its way though doubt and finds its answer in fresh struggle. A dozen poems voice this creative conflict: "The Windward Slope," "For A Drudger," "With Mother Earth," "The Insulting Letter" are among them. I quote the last-named:

Thanks for that insult.—I had too much peace:
In the stone tavern down in yonder vale
For a brief space too much of cakes and ale;
Too much of laughter. An ignoble ease
Had lured me from my vows and destinies.
I had forgot the torrent and the gale,
The cliff, the sunrise, and the forest trail,
And how I throve by nature but with these.

Thanks for that insult.—For it was your pen
Stirred the old blood and made me man again.
And crushing your letter with all thought of you,
Inviolate will and fiery dream, I rose;
Struck for the mountains, put my business through,
And stood victorious over larger foes.

In Leonard one finds an unusual combination of sensitivity and sturdiness, a perception that prompted him to end his preface with these packed lines:

> I made the record that I might be free
> Through mastering art, lest life should master me—
> Finding in art, creating as I went,
> A world more luminous and eloquent.

Yet what is, in all probability, this poet's most concentrated work has never reached the public. *Two Lives,* a long narrative in sonnets, was written in 1914 and, in 1923, a few copies were issued for his close friends. If *Two Lives* (at present a beautifully designed and privately printed manuscript) is ever permitted to be published, there will be few to question Leonard's passionate artistry.

Intellectual but seldom over-intellectualized, his poetry speaks equally to the emotions. Such a sonnet as "To the Victor" goes almost directly to its mark, as swift as the impulse which started it.

> Man's mind is larger than his brow of tears;
> This hour is not my all of time; this place
> My all of earth; nor this obscene disgrace
> My all of life; and thy complacent sneers
> Shall not pronounce my doom to my compeers
> While the Hereafter lights me in the face,
> And from the Past, as from the mountain's base
> Rise, as I rise, the long tumultuous cheers.
>
> And who slays me must overcome a world:
> Heroes at arms, and virgins who became
> Mothers of children, prophecy and song;
> Walls of old cities with their flags unfurled;
> Peaks, headlands, ocean and its isles of fame—
> And sun and moon and all that made me strong!

Within the tradition, these are scarcely the academic accents we have been led to expect. Leonard's poetry is tra-

ditional at least in this—it has, like the best of creative art, its roots in the world we live in as well as in the past.

## ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

Arthur Davison Ficke is another who uses the old counters; his lines contain a succession of asphodels, Pæstum's roses, dryad-haunted brooks, far Hesperides and Helen's Phidian brow. But, although there is much that is thin and tautological in *The Man on the Hilltop* (Mitchell Kennerley, 1915) as well as in his earlier volumes, there is freshness of phrase and feeling in the very midst of his academisms. This peculiar combination—it is hardly a mixture—is most apparent in Ficke's clearest work: *Sonnets of A Portrait-Painter*, originally published in 1914, and reissued (Mitchell Kennerley, 1922) eight years later with revisions and the inclusion of four other groups. The first twelve lines of one of the sonnets entitled "Modern Love" illustrate this duality of speech.

> Fate, with devoted and incessant care,
> Has showered grotesqueness round us day by day.
> If we turn grave, a hurdy-gurdy's air
> Is sure to rasp across the words we say.
> If we stand tense on brink of perilous choices,
> 'Tis never where Miltonic headlands loom,
> But mid the sound of comic-opera voices
> Or the cheap blaze of some hair-dresser's room.
> Heaven knows what moonlit turrets, hazed in bliss,
> Saw Launcelot and night and Guinevere!
> I only know our first impassioned kiss
> Was in your cellar, rummaging for beer. . . .

The sonnet-sequence from which this is taken is an integrated one, telling a gradually developing story and furnish-

ing its own analytic commentary. But, though it tells a story of love, it is not an insistent plucking on one sentimental string; it is a record of sudden happiness and abrupt disillusion, of fever and frustration. One moment the lover declares:

> The entrails of a cat,—some rusty wood,—
> Certain pegs, pins, in curious manner bent,—
> These yield the spirit in its singing mood
> The one supreme heaven-scaling instrument.
> And I, who rate man's clay not overmuch,
> Marvel not more when, from the bow-swept strings
> Celestial music soars, than when we touch
> From mortal flesh strains of immortal things.

And, in another breath, he cries out:

> You are not peace, you are not happiness:
> I look not on you with content or trust . . .

It is the fluctuating course of passion which Ficke has charted with sensitive knowledge. But, although this sequence undoubtedly ranks as the poet's *chef d'œuvre,* it is not his only success. Such a lyric as "Portrait of An Old Woman" is equally sure; the Don Quixote sonnets are firm (as with Santayana, Sterling and Leonard, the sonnet form is Ficke's favorite medium), and the concluding "Epitaph for the Poet V." is a new hymn to intellectual beauty. It is this high seriousness which enabled him (as "Anne Knish") to abet Bynner in making *Spectra* so brilliant a hoax. And it is this same seriousness which dignifies even the least spectacular examples of his poetry.

## ANNA HEMPSTEAD BRANCH

Anna Hempstead Branch is more of a singer than a sonneteer. But she is a philosophizing lyricist rather than a fanciful one. Often, indeed, her ruminations lead her into long and circuitous divagations; she weighs down her simple melodies with mysticism and overintellectualizes what should have been a brief passage on the harp. This too-determined emphasis on the symbolic interferes seriously with her ease of expression; it ruins the arresting "To a New York Shop-Girl Dressed for Sunday," in which, after an excellently direct opening, the poet heads toward philosophic generalities, drops into platitudes and ends on a note of Christmas-card moralizing. But *The Shoes That Danced* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905), frequently effects a combination of classicism and contemporary thought. "The Common Lot" has a delightful freshness; "Songs for My Mother" are almost equally charming and "Grieve Not, Ladies" has a sly humor in its lyric movement. I quote the first few verses of this last poem.

Oh, grieve not, ladies, if at night
  Ye wake to feel your beauty going.
It was a web of frail delight,
  Inconstant as an April snowing.

In other eyes, in other lands,
  In deep fair pools, new beauty lingers,
But like spent water in your hands
  It runs from your reluctant fingers

Ye shall not keep the singing lark
  That owes to earlier skies its duty.
Weep not to hear along the dark
  The sound of your departing beauty.

The fine and anguished ear of night
  Is tuned to hear the smallest sorrow.
Oh, wait until the morning light!
  It may not seem so gone to-morrow!

*Rose of the Wind.* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910) is less freshly flavored. Here Miss Branch has let her thought desiccate her poetry; the long poems are like food that is not only dry but unstimulating. Compare "The Wedding Feast" or the eighty-odd page "Nimrod" with the concentrated monologues in Lascelles Abercrombie's *Emblems of Love.* The warmth, the rich vigor in the work of the Englishman springs not merely from his own eloquence but from the innate conviction of his characters, never from the author's determination to convince. Examine the lengthy mechanism of "The Wedding Feast" with its endless involutions, many of which seem as if they had been dictated by the stammering ghost of Samuel T. Coleridge.

The pebble has a curious will
  That in my hand doth lie.
It seems as motionless and still
  As the zenith in the sky.

It seems to make not any sound.
  It does not hum nor sing.
It keeps a helpless simple round
  Yet is a fearful thing.

Its molecules weave in and out,
  They leap, they plunge, they dive.—
Up from dark gulfs they whirl about
  As if they were alive.

"Nimrod" likewise suffers because of its frightful demands on the reader's patience. But, in spite of its inordinate length, there is a nobility and not a little verbal grandeur

in this eighty-page dissertation. Beneath the rumble, there is much to arrest one in such rhetoric as:

> . . . I will lift
> My fortress straight against God's citadels.
> And having with my frontage besieged the pale
> Frontiers of Heavenly air, then will I lift
> My slow invasion to the immortal plains
> And there, defying all His hosts, will drive
> His bright fleeced whirlwinds; hurricanes with eyes;
> His golden-bellied lightnings; shaggy thunders;
> His meteors that dart like screaming birds
> Among tumultuous forests of black night;
> All strange unhuman monsters that frequent,
> Angelic, brutish, the jungles of fierce air;
> His Silences that crouch amid the waste
> To slay who heareth them beneath the stars
> Awakened out of sleep; His awful Noise,
> Whose mane is like a thousand lions' deep,
> And that with fires doth bristle; His Circumstance,
> His Peradventure, His Go To—all beasts
> Furious with dreadful beauty that He keeps
> To rage with splendor up and down this earth . . .

Miss Branch's fullest poem is "The Monk in the Kitchen." Here is a celebration of order, an ode to cleanness that has a mystical nobility. From its first couplet:

> Order is a lovely thing;
> On disarray it lays its wing,

it proceeds delicately to the heart of her invocation, whose motto might be:

> Whoever makes a thing more bright,
> He is an angel of all light.

Here is simplicity that is neither ostentatious nor spurious. In "The Monk in the Kitchen" Miss Branch's instinct and intellectuality are fused.

## LIZETTE WOODWORTH REESE

Almost at the opposite intellectual extreme stands Lizette Woodworth Reese. Philosophies, fashions, innovations, movements, concern her not at all; her poetry is bare of social interpretations, problems, almost of ideas. Song, unabashed, actually antiquated song is what she delights in. And out of tunes with little novelty or *nuance,* she evokes a personal grace that is as fragrant as an old-fashioned flower garden. Miss Reese's realization of this quality finds its fullest expression in the volumes which she has significantly entitled *A Branch of May* (1887), *A Handful of Lavender* (1891), *A Quiet Road* (1896), *A Wayside Lute* (1909). These volumes, in the chaste reissues printed by Thomas B. Mosher, show Miss Reese as the forerunner of Sara Teasdale, Edna Millay and the new generation to whom simplicity in song is a first essential. Miss Reese thrives within her narrow borders. Her verse is at home behind clipped hedges, among Belleek teacups and delicate Sèvres; I would not be surprised to learn that she writes it in black lace mitts. But it is not only her reticence which gives her work its quality; it is its very excellence of definition. "Spicewood," "Spinning Tops," "Bible Stories," "Driving Home the Cows" are among a score whose very craftsmanship is delightful. There is a lucidity, almost a translucence, in such poems. One can find this limpid color in the sonnets, of which the following is representative.

### SUNRISE

The east is yellow as a daffodil.
Three steeples—three stark swarthy arms—are thrust
Up from the town. The gnarlèd poplars thrill
Down the long street in some keen salty gust—
Straight from the sea and all the sailing ships—

Turn white, black, white again, with noises sweet
And swift. Back to the night the last star slips.
High up the air is motionless, a sheet
Of light. The east grows yellower apace,
And trembles: then, once more, and suddenly,
The salt wind blows, and in that moment's space
Flame roofs, and poplar-tops, and steeples three;
From out the mist that wraps the river-ways,
The little boats, like torches, start ablaze.

Miss Reese's lines are full of happy surprises. She speaks of "daffodils, lighting their candles in the April grass," in a deserted garden walk, "the lean bush crouching hints old royalty," she sees that, before the rain, "the poplar shows its white teeth to the gust"; in "Tears," which is possibly Miss Reese's finest sonnet, she has this vividly suggestive octave.

When I consider Life and its few years—
A wisp of fog betwixt us and the sun;
A call to battle, and the battle done
Ere the last echo dies within our ears;
A rose choked in the grass; an hour of fears;
The gusts that past a darkening shore do beat;
The burst of music down an unlistening street—
I wonder at the idleness of tears.

"The Dust," "Witch Hazel," "Ellen Hanging Clothes," "After," are among many which reveal this poet's simple illuminations. Frequently she suggests a milder Emily Dickinson—her epigrams are less pointed, her epithets less startling—and there is always, as in the following poem, a living translation of the thing observed.

THE ROOM

Towns, lovers, quarrels, bloom—
All change from day to day,
But not that steadfast room,
Far and far away.

The stiff chairs ranged around;
  The blue jar flowered wide;
The quick, close racing sound
  Of poplar trees outside—

I daresay all are there;
  There still two pictures keep—
The girl so tall and fair;
  Christ with His foolish sheep.

# IV

# THE IMAGISTS

BEFORE considering the Imagists as a group, as a tendency or as individuals, it will be best to examine their program. The simplest and most authentic version of their various *pronunciamentos* can be found in the first anthology of *Some Imagist Poets* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915). This, *verbatim,* is their credo:

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the *exact* word, not the nearly exact, nor the merely decorative word.

2. To create new rhythms—as the expressions of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon "free verse" as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.

3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles; nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past. We believe passionately in the artistic values of modern life, but we wish to point out that there is nothing so uninspiring nor so old-fashioned as an aeroplane of the year 1911.

4. To present an image (hence the name: "Imagist"). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.

5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.

6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is the very essence of poetry.

It does not seem possible that these honest and almost platitudinous principles could have evoked the storm of argument, fury and downright vilification that broke after the indomitable Miss Lowell began to champion them. It is difficult, to-day, to see what there was in these tenets to cause the unprecedented excitement that swept the literary centers where even the war was remote. Far from being revolutionary, these principles were not new; they were not even thought so by their sponsors. The Imagists themselves declared they were "the essentials of all great poetry, indeed of all great literature"; they merely thought these principles had fallen into desuetude and so they restated them. When the Imagists failed, it was not because they held to their articles of faith, but because they could not live up to them. Their standards were far higher than the average of their work. Yet their infuriated critics suffered still more. It was with a rueful discomfort that most of them must have realized that, in trying to protect the sacred future from such horrors as "using the exact word," from a full "freedom in the choice of subject," from a poetry that was "hard and clear" and from the importance of concentration, they were actually attacking the best traditions of their beloved past. The Imagists repeated somewhat self-consciously what generations of poets had practised unconsciously.

The chief trouble with the Imagists was not their attitude toward literature but toward life. In the main their work concerned itself little with "the language of common speech," they produced a plethora of poetry that was anything but "hard and clear," their belief that "concentration is the very essence of poetry" did not prevent them from being false to their faith. They assumed as an essential the questionable desirability of cosmopolitanism in art; they were continually falling in love with a new "influence,"

One heard, beneath the slogans of independence and their opposition to contemporary forms, a strange jargon of foreign cultures, a dependence on French or Japanese standards and a manifest allegiance to other rules.

"We are not a school of painters," the Imagists declared; and in this very self-conscious denial they drew attention to their primary weakness, for much of their work was definitely derived not merely from painting but from the technic of painting. They were too often completely satisfied to make one isolated image serve as a work in its entirety; they spent all their energies polishing one detail of composition which a more robust creator would have thrown off as an illuminating bit to be fused in a larger design. In their striving to produce an atmospheric effect, a single line of movement, a mere flash of color, and considering such productions the *Ding an sich,* an end in itself, they showed their very preoccupation with painting. Their uncoördinated striving to reproduce such effects revealed an art less concerned with its own power than with ideas taken from other arts and it disclosed, as *The New Republic* pointed out, "a certain poverty of poetic feeling . . . a certain slenderness and intellectuality of inspiration not compatible with the making of vital poetry."

It seems safe to say that much of Imagism and, for that matter *vers libre,* is an overflow from the plastic and graphic arts. Certain visual effects are thus remarkably achieved; abrupt flashes of color, bursts of speed, interjections, propulsions, and shifting scenes are quickly summoned. But even with an excess of changing rhythms and an increased *tempo,* the ear is assaulted far less than the eye. The appeal is chiefly an ocular one; and in its over-insistence on what should be seen and not heard, in its too-acrobatic leaping from object to object, it ends by distressing and irritating the optic nerve. One feels that

their poetry suffers from nothing so much as an effort to rivet the attention on everything at once. Their credo seems to discount and decry the possibilities of normal vision.

Let us forget the program of the Imagists, which has often so little to do with their poetry, and turn to the accomplishment. At the outset one is struck by the indefinite borders of the school. Ezra Pound was the first to gather the scattered experimenters in a group and, in the first of the collections, *Des Imagistes* (published in America in 1914 by Albert and Charles Boni), we find the names of Richard Aldington, "H. D.," F. S. Flint, Skipwith Cannell, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Ford Maddox Hueffer, Allen Upward, John Cournos—a strangely assembled congregation. It would be difficult to ascertain just what there was in common between Upward's competent prose adaptations ("Scented Leaves from a Chinese Jar"), Cournos' inoffensive rendering of K. Tetmaier's none too original fantasy, James Joyce's excellent but reminiscent rhymes and Skipwith Cannell's dull Nocturnes.

Whatever the bond was, it was not strong enough to preserve this peculiar union. A little later Pound went over to the Vorticists, Cournos began the first of his Gombarov trilogies, Joyce, with *Ulysses* gathering itself together, went back to his novels, Williams and Cannell joined the more insurgent insurgents in *Others*. This left Richard Aldington, H. D., F. S. Flint and Amy Lowell. Miss Lowell, feeling that what was left of the group should be kept intact, became their leader, arranged for the publication of three annual anthologies (*Some Imagist Poets,* 1915, 1916, 1917) and secured the addition of two other poets, D. H. Lawrence and John Gould Fletcher. It is with these anthologies that the rest of this

chapter chiefly concerns itself, and with two of the contributors in particular. I eliminate Lawrence (who is actually no more an Imagist than a militarist); Aldington and Flint are Englishmen and therefore not in the range of the present work; Amy Lowell, an Imagist only on occasion and then experimentally, has been considered in the chapter devoted to her. This leaves H. D. (*née* Hilda Doolittle, an expatriate, born in Pennsylvania) and John Gould Fletcher, originally of Little Rock, Arkansas.

## H. D.

H. D. is by all odds the most characteristic of the group. She is the most nearly perfect of the Imagists; she is, in fact, the only true Imagist. Whatever her work lacks in vigor or warmth, it lacks because of a predetermined attitude which she seldom changes. This consistency results in work that is sometimes sterile, often overweighted with classic literature, but fully as often in poetry that is delicate, fine-spun and exquisitely polished. In the narrow borders of her style she has achieved a concentration so great that it has an intensity of its own. Witness this from *Some Imagist Poets—1915* (Houghton Mifflin Company):

OREAD

Whirl up, sea—
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.

With their swift power and accurate representation of a tossed sea, these lines reveal H. D's limitation. And that limitation is the very thing that the Imagists disclaimed; the

poem is much more related to painting than it is to poetry; it is static, hard, fixed. The "pointed pines" gives us the picture of waves on a canvas rather than the movement which poetry, with its fluid line, can suggest. A dozen such instances may be found in her contributions to the three anthologies, but it is in her own volume that they can be studied in what, in spite of the smallness of her range, is a remarkable variety.

In *Sea Garden* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916) one notices at once how many and sensitive are H. D.'s perceptions of nature and how diverse are the rhythms she uses to express this keenness. Often her love for the beauty of an orchid, a pear-tree, a sea-rose is so great that it hurts her, and yet, with the artist's self-inflicted blows that wring ecstasy out of torture, she opens and reopens her wounds. Witness her "Orchard" or her "Sheltered Garden" that ends:

> For this beauty,
> beauty without strength,
> chokes out life.
> I want wind to break,
> scatter these pink-stalks,
> snap off their spiced heads,
> fling them about with dead leaves—
> spread the path with twigs,
> limbs broken off,
> trail great pine branches,
> hurled from some far wood
> right across the melon-patch,
> break pear and quince—
> leave half-trees, torn, twisted
> but showing the fight was valiant.
>
> O to blot out this garden
> to forget, to find a new beauty
> in some terrible
> wind-tortured place.

HILDA DOOLITTLE ALDINGTON (H. D.)

From a snapshot taken in Athens

This, of course, may be what H. D. longs for, but it is the last thing that she suggests. It is not "a new beauty in some terrible, wind-tortured place" that her art evokes; it is a desire for a calm and secure loveliness in an artistically pagan and preferably Greek world. Her Hellenic attitude is not assumed as it is with some of her less sincere colleagues; it seems an inherent part of her spiritual contemplations. Thus when she attempts to react to the brutal modern world, to sound a "new beauty in some terrible place" as in "Cities," she is utterly confused and thrown back upon herself. Routed by a modernity which does not express her and which she cannot express, she makes the thinnest possible pretense of believing in its beauty. "Strange paradox!" writes Miss Lowell in the highly appreciative concluding chapter of her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry,* "To be the prophet of a renewing art, and to spend one's life longing for a vanished loveliness." It is in an idyllic paganism that she is truly herself. She has discovered —or made—a world as real as the one from which she has fled. Even her purely descriptive pieces reveal this reality. The second of the two poems entitled "Garden" is significant in this connection.

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air—
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat—
plough through it
turning it on either side
of your path.

Here, in the fewest possible words, is something beyond the description of heat; here is the effect of it. And with what swift strokes the picture is drawn. In those four lines with their imaginative evocation of

> heat
> that presses up and blunts
> the points of pears
> and rounds the grapes

one feels the very weight and thick solidity of a July afternoon.

Less potent but no less penetrating are "Mid-day," "Evening," "Sea Violet," "Storm" and this frail mirror of loveliness:

PEAR TREE

> Silver dust
> lifted from the earth,
> higher than my arms reach,
> you have mounted.
> O silver,
> higher than my arms reach
> you front us with great mass;
> no flower ever opened
> so staunch a white leaf,
> no flower ever parted silver
> from such rare silver;
>
> O white pear,
> your flower-tufts
> thick on the branch
> bring summer and ripe fruits
> in their purple hearts.

In all of these poems one receives the impression of something thin and fine struggling out of a compressed mold, of a gift used with a knowledge of its limitations, with almost too sharp a precision and always with a quiet distinction of utterance.

*Hymen* (Henry Holt and Company, 1921) is richer in feeling and larger in scope than anything H. D. has hitherto attempted. The opening poem, with its grave measures and its flexible rhymes, is a marriage ceremony—half ritual, half pageant—crisp in outline, clean in a mounting exaltation. The rhymes themselves must come with something of a shock to those who maintained that the "new" poets had discarded, or could not use, the counterpoint of formal verse. And it is not alone the fact that H. D. uses rhyme but the way she employs it that must disturb her critics. So strictly fashioned are many of the interpolated lyrics that she seems as much of an Elizabethan as a Hellene. The twelve lines sung by the young women bearing the coverlet and linen for the bride-couch have this suave beginning:

> From citron-bower be her bed,
> Cut from branch of tree a-flower,
> Fashioned for her maidenhead.

The song which follows is more resonant. A figure dressed in flame, "the hair a flame, the wings and tunic a rich purple or crimson," symbolizing love, stands against a curtain which is like a purple cloud; the figure, still brighter, "like a flamboyant bird, half emerged in the sunset." This is his song, a beautiful example of H. D.'s advance in color and technic:

> The crimson cover of her bed
> Is not so rich, nor so deeply bled
> The purple-fish that dyed it red,
> As when in a hot sheltered glen
> There flowered these stalks of cyclamen:
>
> (Purple with honey-points
> Of horns for petals;
> Sweet and dark and crisp,
> As fragrant as her maiden kiss.)

There with his honey-seeking lips
The bee clings close and warmly sips,
And seeks with honey-thighs to sway
And drink the very flower away.

(Ah, stern the petals drawing back;
Ah rare, ah virginal her breath!)

Crimson, with honey-seeking lips,
The sun lies hot across his back,
The gold is flecked across his wings.
Quivering he sways and quivering clings
(Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!)
One moment, then the plunderer slips
Between the purple flower-lips.

She who was once accused of being a frozen Lesbian, refutes the characterization with such lines. In *Hymen,* more effectively than in *Sea Garden,* H. D. accomplishes the miracle of fusing warm blood and chill stone. Her marbles palpitate; the smallest of her Tanagras are flushed with life. More than any of the Imagists, H. D. has the sculptor's power of transfixing a gesture and yet not making it static; she can capture a movement without seeming to arrest it. The dirge, to which I have referred in a previous chapter, is another instance of the subtlety with which she shapes an old music. As, up to the present, it has not appeared in her published volumes, I quote this beautiful *andante.*

LETHE

Nor skin nor hide nor fleece
Shall cover you,
Nor curtain of crimson nor fine
Shelter of cedar-wood be over you,
Nor the fir-tree
Nor the pine.

Nor sight of whin nor gorse
Nor river-yew,
Nor fragrance of flowering bush
Nor wailing of reed-bird to waken you.
Nor of linnet
Nor of thrush.

Nor word nor touch nor sight
Of lover, you
Shall long through the night but for this:
The roll of the full tide to cover you
Without question.
Without kiss.

*Hymen* has much of this tensity; it is maintained through the tiniest of the later poems, not one of which is careless or undistinguished. Every few lines discover for us a stripped beauty. One can choose haphazard here; one cannot do better than select a picture as shimmering and tender as this song:

You are as gold
as the half-ripe grain
that merges to gold again,
as white as the white rain
that beats through
the half-opened flowers
of the great flower tufts
thick on the black limbs
of an Illyrian apple bough.
Can honey distill such fragrance
as your bright hair—
for your face is as fair as rain,
yet as rain that lies clear
on white honey-comb
lends radiance to the white wax,
so your hair on your brow
casts light for a shadow.

It is poetry like this which has led critics to rate H. D. as the only true Imagist. And it is in such moments that

she escapes not only the borders of Imagism but the boundaries of her own constraint.

## JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

John Gould Fletcher represents the other extreme of Imagism. Where H. D.'s poems are examples of swift condensation, Fletcher's are experiments in an equally swift disintegration; where H. D. is parsimonious in phrase, Fletcher is prodigal. Before he became an Imagist, he published five small books of poems which, although Fletcher has referred to them as his literary wild oats, are orthodox and tame. Two years later (all five had appeared in 1913) an entirely different poet made his appearance with *Irradiations —Sand and Spray* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915) and the year following, *Goblins and Pagodas* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916) carried his experiments still further. The original editions are no longer in print, but the contents of both volumes have been combined in a double book. This collection, rechristened *Preludes and Symphonies* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922) traces Fletcher's first departures, his immersion (and, at times, his submersion) in a sea of images and his emergence from detached brilliancies to a sombre mysticism.

The "Irradiations" are full of an extraordinary fancy; imagination riots through them, even though it is often a bloodless and bodiless imagination—a brilliant, explosive set of improvisations. Even if one is unready to grant the theory of the unrelated method which Fletcher has employed, one can only applaud the success of such clear and pictorial suggestiveness as:

> The trees, like great jade elephants,
> Chained, stamp and shake 'neath the gadflies of the breeze;

The trees lunge and plunge, unruly elephants:
The clouds are their crimson howdah-canopies,
The sunlight glints like the golden robe of a shah.
Would I were tossed on the wrinkled backs of those trees.

Here is an instance of how Fletcher can, by the use of a sudden figure, turn a statement of fact into an illuminating fantasy:

Flickering of incessant rain
On flashing pavements:
Sudden scurry of umbrellas:
Bending, recurved blossoms of the storm.

The last line transforms all that has gone before, with its sharp imaginative twist. And, in a less exuberant vein, there is an equal individuality of vision in this inspired fragment:

O, seeded grass, you army of little men
Crawling up the slope with quivering, quick blades of steel:
You who storm millions of graves, tiny green tentacles of Earth,
Interlace yourself tightly over my heart,
And do not let me go:
For I would lie here forever and watch with one eye
The pilgrimaging ants in your dull, savage jungles,
The while with the other I see the stiff lines of the slope
Break in mid-air, a wave surprisingly arrested;
And above them, wavering, dancing, bodiless, colorless, unreal,
The long thin lazy fingers of the heat.

These are all extraordinarily successful in execution and effect. But even here there are hints of his growing wordiness, of a jumble of figures carrying the unrelated method to a point where it almost loses itself in incoherence. Witness this passage with its sudden changes of figure, an effervescence of crumbling and re-assembled brilliance:

Over the roof-tops race the shadows of clouds;
Like horses the shadows of clouds charge down the street.

Whirlpools of purple and gold,
Winds from the mountains of cinnebar,
Lacquered mandarin moments, palanquins swaying and balancing
Amid the vermilion pavilions, against the jade balustrades.
Glint of the glittering wings of dragon-flies in the light:
Silver filaments, golden flakes settling downwards,
Rippling, quivering flutters, repulse and surrender,
The sun broidered upon the rain,
The rain rustling with the sun.

The second half of the volume moves with a still greater swirl and rapidity. The set of eleven "color symphonies" is an elaborate design in which the tone as well as the thought is summoned and dominated by color associations, sometimes closely related, sometimes far-fetched. There are moments when the pitch is so high and the speed so great that the mind, confused by the rout of brilliance, sees only a blur of gray. Just as Swinburne, with all his mastery of verbal melody, proved that poetry cannot exist on sound alone, so Fletcher, obsessed with his pigments, unwittingly demonstrates that it cannot live when it places its sole dependence on color. A passage from the "Red Symphony" illustrates the fallacy:

Like a crimson lake
The light overflows and touches the bulging surfaces
With carmine, with scarlet,
With orange, with vermilion,
With brick red, with bluish purple,
With maroon, with rose, with russet,
With savage green, with snowy blue,
With grey, with ebony, with gold.

This seems far less like a fragment of poetry than a part of Winsor and Newton's color chart. But the best of these symphonies (the "White Symphony" and "Green Symphony" are the most integrated) have an expansive spontaneity. It is a spontaneity of words, of rhythms, of subconscious associations. "It contains no thought," writes Conrad Aiken in the chapter "Possessor and Possessed" in his *Scepticisms,* "Mr. Fletcher is not a conceptual poet. It contains, in the strictly human sense, extraordinarily little of the sort of emotion which relates to the daily life of men and women. . . . It is a sort of absolute poetry, a poetry of detached waver and brilliance, a beautiful flowering of language alone, a parthenogenesis, as if language were fertilized by itself rather than by thought or feeling. Remove the magic of phrase and sound, and there is nothing left: no thread of continuity, no relation between one page and the next, no thought, no story, no emotion. But the magic of phrase and sound is powerful, and it takes one into a fantastic world where one is etherealized, where one has deep emotions indeed, but emotions star-powdered, and blown to flame by speed and intensity rather than by thought or human warmth."

The symphonies are too long to quote any one of them in full but, rather than show nothing from the best of these unique poems, I mutilate the "Green Symphony" and detach the following fragment:

> The trees splash the sky with their fingers,
> A restless green rout of stars . . .
>
> The trees are like a sea;
> Tossing,
> Trembling,
> Roaring,
> Wallowing,

Darting their long green flickering fronds up at the sky,
Spotted with white blossom-spray.

The trees are roofs:
Hollow caverns of cool blue shadow,
Solemn arches
In the afternoons.
The whole vast horizon
In terrace beyond terrace,
Pinnacle above pinnacle,
Lifts to the sky
Serrated ranks of green on green.

They caress the roofs with their fingers,
They sprawl about the river to look into it;
Up the hill they come
Gesticulating challenge:
They cower together
In dark valleys;
They yearn out over the fields . . .

The trees lash the sky with their leaves,
Uneasily shaking their dark green manes.

In *The Tree of Life* (The Macmillan Company, 1918) the more native *Breakers and Granite* (The Macmillan Company, 1921) and the group of short poems in *American Poetry—1922,* a group not yet reprinted in any of his volumes, Fletcher searches for depths rather than surfaces. Still uncritical or unaware of his failures, still unable to solidify the fluid stream of his sensations, the recent poems are far more personal than anything Fletcher has attempted. They are the very antithesis of the dehumanized symphonies. "The Future," the set of "Prayers," the grave lyrics mark the advent of a new poet, one who has grown through "schools" and rococo innovations to a passionate mysticism. Whatever Fletcher may have lost in associations of color, he has more than compensated by a gain in emotional vitality.

Even two such quiet quatrains have a mystical emphasis that his previous work barely suggested:

THE ROAD

As one who walks in sleep, up a familiar lane
I went, my road to discover:
In my head was dark bewilderment and in my heart a pain;
The branches hung straight over.

At the summit the sky blazed with endless stars, refired
By the ebbing of the day;
The earth was darkly beautiful and I was very tired.
There was my road, and nothing more to say.

The majestic "Lincoln" establishes a closer human relationship. The last section of this poem, which has a prayer-like reverence, contains the most solemn notes this poet has ever struck.

Strew over him flowers:
Blue forget-me-nots from the north and the bright pink arbutus
From the east, and from the west rich orange blossom,
But from the heart of the land take the passion-flower,

Rayed, violet, dim,
With the nails that pierced, the cross that he bore and the circlet,
And beside it there lay also one lonely snow-white magnolia,
Bitter for remembrance of the healing which has passed.

*Breakers and Granite* is an attempt to put America into a poetic panorama. It is, as such a project would have to be, an uneven work, but in it Fletcher has achieved some of his broadest effects. Out of a tangle of theories, a personality stands free. From a technical standpoint, the advance is obvious; he begins to employ rhyme and formal rhythms without difficulty. Such poems as "Clipper-Ships," "The Passing of the South," "The Building of Chicago," "New

England Sunset" have Fletcher's old rush of words, but he has learned how to curb if not to control them. These four poems are all written in the polyphonic prose which Fletcher was one of the first to exploit and which Miss Lowell has used with such freedom. Admirable in its spirited evocation of the past, this is the swinging start of "Clipper-Ships," with its rich *mélange* of rhyme and assonance:

> Beautiful as a tiered cloud, skysails set and shrouds twanging, she emerges from the surges that keep running away before day on the low Pacific shore. With the roar of the wind blowing half a gale after, she heels and lunges, and buries her bows in the smother, lifting them swiftly and scattering the glistening spray-drops from her jibsails with laughter. Her spars are cracking, her royals are half splitting, her lower stunsail booms are bent aside, like bow-strings ready to loose, and the water is roaring into her scuppers, but she still staggers out under a full press of sail, her upper trucks enkindled by the sun into shafts of rosy flame.
>
> Oh, the anchor is up and the sails, they are set, and it's 'way Rio; round Cape Stiff and up to Boston, ninety days hauling at the ropes: the decks slope and the stays creak as she lurches into it, sending her jib awash at every thrust, and a handful of dust and a thirst to make you weep are all we get for being two years away to sea.

It is a far cry from this and the Whitmanic "Lincoln" to Imagism. Fletcher has departed much further from the tenets of the creed than H. D., even in her later work. Yet, though the group has dissolved, its work has been accomplished. The influence of the Imagists, moreover, has been wide, their program corrective; a healthy reaction from the verbose, the carelessly facile, the burbling platitudes. Whatever they may not have done, they helped swell the tide of romantic naturalism, a tide in which their activity was a high wave.

# THE IMPRESSIONISTS

While the reader must be warned again that most divisions are arbitrary and that the poets discussed in these chapters have not (with the exception of the Imagists) proclaimed affiliation with any group, the classifications are natural if not strictly logical. The three poets chosen to represent the impressionist tendency have never, to my knowledge, been mentioned together, and yet they illustrate various phases of an impulse which has its analogy in painting. The poetic impressionists, resembling their prototypes of the brush, are more interested in surface than in mass. Their work has shimmer rather than solidity; it dispenses with weight, minimizes perspective and gives us, instead, the bloom of atmosphere. It is not a world of heavily moving or heavier immobile bodies that they see, but a flat juxtaposition of color and lines, a pattern of impacts in two dimensions, a world in tapestry. Thus, seizing upon the sudden plane presented to their vision, they disclose their method: a record of the immediate impression of the thing rather than the thing itself.

## WALLACE STEVENS

Wallace Stevens might be called, if one were anxious to make a closer analogy to painting, a pointillist rather than an impressionist. His method is the breaking up of the pattern into tiny chromatic clashes, the neo-impressionism of Seurat. He is fond of little blocks of pure color, verbal

mosaics in which the syllables are used as pigments. It is an "absolute" poetry toward which Stevens seems to progress, an art of syllabic tone and color which, separate from any relation to the human element, aims to exist and blossom by itself in a pure æstheticism. Having little gift for force or amplitude, Stevens places his emphasis on detached tonal threads, on conceits and strays of perceptions, on pale niceties rather than on content.

The very titles of his poems accentuate this disregard of perspective and mass not only by their charming incongruity with the lines which follow them but in their equally arbitrary selection for mere color values. For example: "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage," "The Florist Wears Knee-Breeches," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock." I quote the last fantasia to illustrate Stevens's peculiar palette.

> The houses are haunted
> By white night-gowns.
> None are green,
> Or purple with green rings,
> Or green with yellow rings,
> Or yellow with blue rings,
> None of them are strange,
> With socks of lace
> And beaded ceintures.
> People are not going
> To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
> Only, here and there, an old sailor,
> Drunk and asleep in his boots,
> Catches tigers
> In red weather.

And here, in a less strident though more familiar key, is one of the twelve sections of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,"

in which meaning is subordinated to a purely phrasal "arrangement":

> The fops of fancy in their poems leave
> Memorabilia of the mystic spouts,
> Spontaneously watering their gritty soils.
> I am a yeoman, as such fellows go.
> I know no magic trees, no balmy boughs,
> No silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits.
> But, after all, I know a tree that bears
> A semblance to the thing I have in mind.
> It stands gigantic, with a certain tip
> To which all birds come sometime in their time.
> But when they go that tip still tips the tree.

This use of words for æsthetic elaboration rather than for their own sake is not only a limitation but an indication that Stevens does not appreciate the edges of language. There are times when he scarcely seems to understand his medium. For words, though they have a thousand shades and accents, are not merely colors or sounds. They have an inherent value; they are strong in associations which are not preconcerned with musical or pictorial sensations. Besides the individual memories with which man reinforces words which he recognizes, words have a definite, an expressive power which Stevens, seeking only for the play of rhythmic nuance, fails to use. Caring little for content, he retreats further and further into an obscure verbalism. Unable to effect simple illusions, he endeavors to bemuse with elaborate prestidigitation, plucking shining phrases out of a vacuum.

Whatever the unconscious reactions of Stevens to his subject, his consciousness dictates its will and it is not like the consciousness of any other craftsman. In this determination there is a waywardness that makes him prelude grotesque lines with irrelevant titles, a placid perversity that allows

him, with corresponding equanimity, to frame such an awkward composition as:

For who can care at the wigs despoiling the Satan ear?
And who does not seek the sky unfuzzed, soaring to the princox?

It seems incredible that any but a tone-deaf artist could take pleasure in such a confusion of effects or in such childish alliteration as:

Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns,

or so puerile a mixture as the following, which was part of a prize-winning group in "Poetry" (1919), a group which Miss Harriet Monroe, editor of the magazine, called "masterpieces of lyric beauty," and which moved her to rate Stevens as "the peer of any poet now living and of many a famous one now dead and enshrined."

ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

One looks to Stevens for an explanation of these postures. All he vouchsafes, by way of elucidation, is this:

It is with a strange malice
That I distort the world.

Stevens' words do not, however, always live in an emotional isolation or a state of pertinacity. In *Harmonium* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), though passion is never summoned, wraiths of feeling drift mistily across the pages. "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sunday Morning" achieve a richness which is not merely the result of a color sensibility. Both of these poems have the cool elegance to which Stevens seems to aspire and which his work infrequently attains. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (which might, with equal precision, be called "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens") has a chastity of design which suggests the Chinese. It would be unprofitable to detail the patent failures in his own employment of words or the many conscious eccentricities which Stevens first published in *Others* (Stevens scarcely clarifies his utterance by placing his tongue in his cheek) especially since he has finally found his métier. Instead, I quote the last section of "Peter Quince" which, with its orthodox intonation, has an unusual depth of sombre shades.

> Beauty is momentary in the mind—
> The fitful tracing of a portal;
> But in the flesh it is immortal.
>
> The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
> So evenings die, in their green going,
> A wave, interminably flowing.
> So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
> The cowl of Winter, done repenting.
> So maidens die, to the auroral
> Celebration of a maiden's choral.
>
> Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings
> Of those white elders; but, escaping,
> Left only Death's ironic scraping.

Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

When one considers that Stevens allowed his work to appear in magazines for a period of over ten years before permitting his poems to appear in a book, one must reserve finalities of judgment. Such reticence as his should command a certain measure of patience from us. Stevens's goal is not the one to which most of his *confrères* are struggling; if he is often unsure of his path, he is, at least, seeking his own way, a search which may win a slender success.

## ADELAIDE CRAPSEY

Tiny in bulk, frail in substance, the work of Adelaide Crapsey is extraordinary in its tactile delicacy. Hers is a reticent impressionism: a few monotones in silver and gray, landscapes which have not been deserted by the sun but which seem conscious of the chill of dusk. *Verse* (The Manas Press, 1915; reissued with half a dozen additional poems by Alfred A. Knopf, 1922) has an almost autobiographical quality. Its pages are tense with the premonition of the author's death at Saranac Lake where her window looked down at the graveyard. This poetry quivers with a natural condensation; the poet knew how short a period remained for her perceptions to record themselves, and so the work of a few years is concentrated in a poetry of few words. Her "Cinquains"—a form which she originated—are the crystallization of her spirit. These five-line stanzas fashioned in a firm mold (the lines gather power with their increase of two to four, then to six, then to eight and then the sudden drop back to two syllables) possibly owe a little

to the influence of the Japanese *hokku,* but they tremble with the poet's own fragility.

TRIAD

These be
Three silent things:
The falling snow . . the hour
Before the dawn . . the mouth of one
Just dead.

Even the occasional psychological interpretations are executed in the same sparse manner, a few bright strokes that seem to crowd the canvas. It is interesting to compare Wallace Stevens's treatment of the Susanna legend (which he has incongruously called "Peter Quince at the Clavier") with Adelaide Crapsey's miniature irony.

SUSANNA AND THE ELDERS

"Why do
You thus devise
Evil against her?" "For that
She is beautiful, delicate;
Therefore."

It is this fastidiousness of speech which tints her brief impressions, a personal sensitivity that keeps her colors thin. Even a subject as vast as Niagara is brought down to a slender wistfulness.

NIAGARA

How frail
Above the bulk
Of crashing water hangs,
Autumnal, evanescent, wan,
The moon.

Although the lyrics are less individual, they do not lack fragrance. The compact poignance of the various "Cinquains" is in "Mad Song," "The Lonely Death," and this "Dirge," which the poet might have written for herself.

Never the nightingale,
Oh, my dear,
Never again the lark
Thou wilt hear;
Though dusk and the morning still
Tap at thy window-sill,
Though ever love call and call
Thou wilt not hear at all,
My dear, my dear.

## ALTER BRODY

Alter Brody, far less sensitive to the color of language than either Wallace Stevens or Adelaide Crapsey, has a directness of his own. He confesses his impressionism; he is concerned "only with ordinary unrelated details." He writes:

I am the painter drudging with moist paints and sharp etching needles,
Cutting little square panels out of life.

It is this pictorial quality which distinguishes *A Family Album* (B. W. Huebsch, 1918). In spite of many crude immaturities, a dozen poems illustrate his gift of lifting ugliness to the plane of glamour; his work seems striving to find the point where what is squalid can be balanced and finally fused with the whole. "Art," Brody summarizes, "is not only a record but a harmonizing of dissonances." This impulse is to be observed most clearly in those poems where

Brody suggests a participation in city life and, at the same time, an apparent detachment from it.

GHETTO TWILIGHT

An infinite weariness comes into the faces of the old
tenements
As they stand massed together on the block
Tall and thoughtfully silent
In the enveloping twilight.
Pensively
They eye each other across the street
Through their dim windows;
With a sad, recognizing stare,
Watching the red glow fading in the distance
At the end of the street
Behind the black church spires;
Watching the vague sky lowering overhead
Purple with clouds of colored smoke
From the extinguished sunset;
Watching the tired faces coming home from work,
Like dry-breasted hags
Welcoming their children to their withered arms.

Much of this poetry is a reflection of industrial activity against a background of ancient dreams; young America seen through the eyes of old Russia. Witness "Kartúshkiya-Beróza" (possibly the most individual poem, but too long to quote), which is, in microcosm, a whole Russian-Jewish boyhood; "Times Square," where one world impinges on another; the mixed tenderness and irony of "Ma"; the remarkable title-poem, "A Family Album," with its vivid features, and "The Neurological Institute," a sort of Spoon River Anthology of the East Side. The memory of the ghetto haunts this volume; even Broadway takes on the quality of a seething *Judengasse.*

Being an impressionist, Brody offers no panaceas, he attempts no propaganda. He is content to record the interplay of environment and heredity, to fix the moment between fact and fantasy. "The Deserted Church," "A City Park," "The Old Courtesan" and "November" are four dissimilar examples of his imaginative vigor, the last demanding quotation.

NOVEMBER

I

Fearlessly,
They thrust their dry branches against the sky;
Long since the wind rifled their blossoms
And scattered their foliage on the ground—
Now they stand sternly erect,
Naked and strong,
Having nothing to lose.

II

They strew the ground,
Drifting into long, shallow banks,
Piling into deep red mounds,
Eddying under the trees
Aimlessly—
Long since the winter wilted them with its breath
And tore them from their twigs.
Now they are free,
Having no need to grow.

# THE EXPRESSIONISTS

EXPRESSIONISM, as a word, was coined in Germany; as a movement, it was anticipated in America by the plays of Eugene O'Neill, the settings of Robert Edmond Jones, the stories of Sherwood Anderson, the music of Leo Ornstein, the poetry of Maxwell Bodenheim, Lola Ridge, William Carlos Williams. Although definitions are treacherous, one might say that the difference between impressionism and expressionism is the difference between life in repose and thought in action. Impressionism gives us the object colored by the artist's temperament, heightened by his mood or thrown out of focus by the vividness of its impact—but the object remains itself. Expressionism considers the object only to express its inner quality; the expressionist will use reality or depart from it without preparing his audience. He will leap from representation to abstraction, if by so doing he can achieve either a fresh intensity and motion, or record, by arbitrary symbols, what the realist would have considered inexpressible. The expressionists never wish to make an imitation of an object, they aim to record the sensation that the object arouses in them. Impressionism, one might say, is the scene or the emotion interpreted by the artist; expressionism is the artist interpreted by the scene.

To communicate this psychic excitation, a new technic or at least a more violent one has been found. It is a technic of abrupt contrasts, exaggerated dynamics, distortions planned to sharpen the emphasis. In music, as well as in poetry and painting, intensity has been goaded by whipping up sound and color, by driving a hundred clashing stimuli

to the limits of receptivity. Caught in the momentum of this vortex, much of modern art becomes increasingly neurotic, morbid and self-destructive. This age may witness the end of art as we have known it; science may make the *katharsis* of art seem like a puny and ineffectual release. The miracles of science may well compensate for the death of the artistic impulse by supplying mankind with means to realize his dreams, sublimate his desires, bring him omnipotence—in short, fulfil his wishes through the extension of the machine. Meanwhile, the world feeds on what it has. And expressionism is another form of its unsatisfied spiritual hunger.

## MAXWELL BODENHEIM

*Minna and Myself* (Pagan Publishing Company, 1918) contains the first hints of Bodenheim's expressionism. But his later intensities are only foreshadowed in the precise delicacies of this volume. Unlike Stevens, Bodenheim has an extreme sensitivity to the power of words, an understanding which, in his use of the verbal *nuance,* results in effects that are little short of dazzling. Words, under his adroit manipulation, bear strange blossoms and stranger fruit; fantastic adjectives are grafted upon startled nouns and the consequent hybrid is like no other contemporary growth.

### HILL-SIDE TREE

Like a drowsy, rain-browned saint,
You squat, and sometimes your voice
In which the wind takes no part,
Is like mists of music wedding each other.
A drunken, odor-laced peddler is the morning wind.
He brings you golden-scarfed cities
Whose voices are swirls of bells burdened with summer;
And maidens whose hearts are galloping princes.

And you raise your branches to the sky,
With a whisper that holds the smile you cannot shape.

Bodenheim has no superior in these shifting pictures, the depiction of tenuous moods in which one figure blurs into another. In the realm of the whimsical-grotesque, he walks with a light and nimble step; the black and whites of Beardsley are scarcely more decorative than such fantasies as "Old Age," "To One Dead," "Interlude," several of the love-poems and this gracefully *macabre* drawing:

DEATH

I shall walk down the road.
I shall turn and feel upon my feet
The kisses of death like scented rain.
For death is a black slave with little silver birds
Perched in a sleeping wreath upon his head.
He will tell me, his voice like jewels
Dropped into a satin bag,
How he has tiptoed after me down the road,
His heart made a dark whirlpool with longing for me.
Then he will graze me with his hands;
And I shall be one of the sleeping silver birds
Between the cold waves of his hair, as he tiptoes on. . . .

In *Advice* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1920) the tone is sharper, the figures more intricate. Sometimes Bodenheim packs his similes so close that they become inextricably mixed; sometimes he spins his ideas so thin that the cord of coherence snaps and leaves the reader only a handful of colored ravellings. More frequently still, he allows his poems to sink beneath the weight of ornaments with which he has tricked out designs that, in themselves, are essentially simple. But Bodenheim is not fundamentally interested in simplicity. He analyzes his sensations, using realism only as a point of departure, intellectualizing every gesture, putting every figment

of thought through a rigid examination. Thus, what Bodenheim loses in spontaneity he gains in intensive exaggeration. The first poem in *Advice* is indicative.

ADVICE TO A STREET-PAVEMENT

Lacerated grey has bitten
Into your shapeless humility.
Little episodes of roving
Strew their hieroglyphics on your muteness.
Life has given you heavy stains
Like an ointment growing stale.
Endless feet tap over you
With a maniac insistence.

O unresisting street-pavement,
Keep your passive insolence
At the dwarfs who scorn you with their feet.
Only one who lies upon his back
Can disregard the stars.

A desire to pack his lines beyond their capacity, to make word-relations which have an old antipathy for each other occupy the same space at the same time, causes him to strain and dislocate his mental musculature. Instead of enriching his utterance, he merely macerates it; in the midst of cunning disguises, he can be as baldly *gauche* as in the lines which begin his address to "Track-Workers," the metaphorical absurdity of the sixth line being a triumph of the ridiculous.

The rails you carry cut into your hands,
Like the sharp lips of an unsought lover.
As you stumble over the ties
Sunlight is clinging, yellow spit
Raining down upon your faces.
You are the living cuspidors of day.

*Introducing Irony* (Boni and Liveright, 1922) is the essence of Bodenheim; acridity acidified. Here he allows his

ironic expressionism to dictate its harshest accents and, true to the technic of a race which has fed on frustration, intensifies it by the very bitterness of his coldly picked epigrams. It is an excessive elegance, almost a mincing nicety of language that Bodenheim affects; a diction that startles with its apparently wild but precisely calculated leaps. In *Introducing Irony,* Bodenheim's transilient euphuism is greater than ever. His is an acrobatic mind that juggles a dozen mixed metaphors during its flight, a mind that, when it is not leaving one high trapeze for a giddier one, tosses up glittering knives, balancing itself upon the points of emotion with a mordant grimace. He slips from one posture to the other with peculiar agility, and he fascinates by the very precariousness of his position. It is a fascination which is not necessarily charming; he is often garrulous, grotesque, narcistic, verbally dandified, frequently irritating, seldom unintelligible. He may be—and, at times, is—so wedded to strangeness of speech that he brings his oddities even beyond the borders of preciosity, but he is, none the less (possibly all the more) provocative. Let those who find Bodenheim merely a malicious phrase-twister read such clear though intricate mood analyses as "Jack Rose," "Turmoil in a Morgue," "Two Sonnets to My Wife," the second and seventh of "Finalities"; let a scoffer of this poetry examine the brutal vividness of "Summer Evening: New York Subway-Station," matched by the light satire of "Uneasy Reflections." Let him observe the peculiar texture of the prose that concludes the volume (and, incidentally, his novel, *Blackguard,* published in 1923) or the deftness of some of the monologues which, like "Meditations in a Cemetery," contain reflections as sharpened as:

> The tombstones around my path
> Have been crisply visited by names

To which they bear no relation.
Imagine the perturbation
Of a stone removed
From the comprehension of a mountain
And branded with the name of A. Rozinsky!

This volume has an added interest because of its closer approximation of solidity; Bodenheim struggles here with the "hard fashion," he fights with "the resisting mass." Although he is not uniformly successful, several of the sonnets triumph over their own restrictions without either distorting the pattern or Bodenheim's attention to his own thoughts. The second of the "Sonnets to My Wife" is significant.

My wife relents to life and does not speak
Each moment with a deft and rapid note.
Sometimes a clumsy weirdness finds her throat
And ushers in a music that is weak
And bargains with the groping of her heart.
But even then she plays with graver tones
That do not sell themselves to laughs and moans
But seek the counsel of a deeper art.

She drapes her loud emotions in a shroud
Of glistening thought that waves above their dance
And sometimes parts to show their startled eyes.
The depths of mind within her have not bowed
To sleek emotion with its amorous glance.
She slaps its face and laughs at its surprise!

Such examples and the still more patent brilliance of too cleverly constructed chains of epigrams ("Impulsive Dialogue" is one of the most arresting), cannot disguise the admission that their poet is in continual danger of being his own parodist. He coddles and croons over his idiom. He enjoys a little too much and somewhat too self-consciously the paradoxical mating of adverbs and adjectives, of adjec-

tives and nouns that ordinarily would shrink from each other. He delights in such forced marriages as "cold elation," "meek verbosity," "noisy thinness, "deftly tepid," "tactful lustres," "animated mausoleum," "stagnant buffoon," "limpid warehouse." Technically, too, his rhythms often betray him. He is not quite at ease in the formal measures, a piece like "Seaweed from Mars," jarring with an intrusion of flat feet and false quantities, is a tumbling of awkwardly interfering metres. But, however special his talent may be, this poet is an original. Within his self-sharpened limitation, Bodenheim is mordantly himself.

## LOLA RIDGE

In spite of the many attempts to express the momentum and lacerated beauty of a metropolis, it has remained for one reared far from our chaotic centers to translate these crowded streets. In *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (B. W. Huebsch, 1918) Lola Ridge brings a fresh background to set off her sensitive evaluations; her early life in Australia has doubtless enabled her to draw the American city with such an unusual sense of mass and perspective. The city dominates her book; but the whole modern industrial world surges beneath it. "The Song of Iron," with its glorification of labor, is a veritable pæan of triumph. And yet, out of these majestic lines, the still small voice of the poet makes itself heard; a strangely attenuated voice with a tense accent; a fineness that, seeming fragile, is like the delicacy of a thin steel spring. Nowhere does this distinction of utterance maintain itself so strikingly as in the title-poem. "The Ghetto" is at once personal in its piercing sympathy and, in spite of a rhetorical anti-climax in the shape of an envoy, epical in its sweep. It is studded with images that are sur-

prising and yet never strained or irrelevant. In this poem Miss Ridge achieves the sharp line, the fixation of motion, the condensed clarity desired by the Imagists. Observe this description of Sodos, the old saddle-maker:

> Time spins like a crazy dial in his brain,
> And night by night
> I see the love-gesture of his arm
> In its green-greasy coat-sleeve
> Circling the Book,
> And the candles gleaming starkly
> On the blotched-paper whiteness of his face—
> Like a mis-written psalm. . . .
> Night by night
> I hear his lifted praise
> Like a broken whinnying
> Before the Lord's shut gate.

Or turn to the picture of the aged scholar who smiles at the "stuffed blue shape backed by a nickel star," smiles

> with the pale irony
> Of one who holds
> The wisdom of the Talmud stored away
> In his mind's lavender.

Or the lyric ecstasy in the same poem that suddenly interrupts with:

> Nude glory of the moon!
> That leaps like an athlete on the bosoms of the young girls,
> stripped of their linens;
> Stroking their breasts that are smooth and cool as mother-
> of-pearl.
> Till the nipples tingle and burn as though little lips plucked
> at them.
> They shudder and grow faint.
> And their ears are filled as with a delirious rhapsody,
> That Life, like a drunken player,
> Strikes out of their clear, white bodies as out of ivory keys.

And this is "The Ghetto's" exquisite cadence:

Without, the frail moon
Worn to a silvery tissue,
Throws a faint glamour on the roofs,
And down the shadowy spires
Lights tip-toe out . . .
Softly as when lovers close street doors.

Out of the Battery
A little wind
Stirs idly—like an arm
Trailed over a boat's side in dalliance—
Rippling the smooth dead surface of the heat.
And Hester Street,
Like a forlorn woman over-borne
By many babies at her teats,
Turns on her trampled bed to meet the day.

Elsewhere, the same dignity of utterance is maintained. Frequently it expresses itself in a direct, colloquial idiom. But more often it turns the straightforward accents into an unearthly magic with nothing more supernatural than an extraordinary sense of metaphor. Here (from "Faces") is one example among many:

A late snow beats
With cold white fists upon the tenements,
Hurriedly drawing blinds and shutters
Like tall old slatterns
Pulling aprons about their heads.

*Sun-Up* (B. W. Huebsch, 1920) contains the same vibrance. The first poem is a five-part picture, obviously an autobiography, which is one of the most intensive pieces which this movement has produced. It is an expressionistic novel in thirty-six pages. Quotation from so integrated a work is impossible; instead, I select a briefer though equally

subtle mood to illustrate Miss Ridge's carefully poised sensitivity.

INTERIM

The earth is motionless
And poised in space . . .
A great bird resting in its flight
Between the alleys of the stars.
It is the wind's hour off . . .
The wind has nestled down among the corn . . .
The two speak privately together,
Awaiting the whirr of wings.

But, though silence is often invoked in this volume, there is no lack of fire. The concluding section is a sudden blaze, a flame that burns through the tossing "Sons of Belial" to the symbolic "Wind Rising in the Alleys." This energy, so different from the impulse which shapes Miss Ridge's quieter poems, finds its culmination in "Reveille," from which I take the opening lines.

Come forth, you workers!
Let the fires go cold—
Let the iron spill out,—out of the troughs—
Let the iron run wild
Like a red bramble on the floors—
Leave the mill and the foundry and the mine
And the shrapnel lying on the wharves—
Leave the desk and the shuttle and the loom—
Come,
With your ashen lives,
Your lives like dust in your hands.

I call upon you, workers.
It is not yet light
But I beat upon your doors.
You say you await the Dawn
But I say you are the Dawn.
Come, in your irresistible unspent force
And make new light upon the mountains.

## WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

William Carlos Williams, who originally appeared with the Imagists and *Others,* has an equally original utterance. But it is a far more uneven expression than either Bodenheim's or Lola Ridge's. Williams is erratic in his flights from reality; too often when he imagines himself skimming the clouds on his expressionistic Pegasus, he is merely sliding down the saddle of a wooden mount. Even the early *The Tempers* (Elkin Mathews, London, 1913), a thin, five-by-four-inch book, discloses Williams's characteristic uncertainty. Stilted rhymes ("translated from the Spanish") elbow groping experiments; peculiarities of phrasing are crowded aside by reminders of Browning as lame and orthodox as "The Death of Franco of Cologne; His Prophecy of Beethoven" which begins:

> It is useless, good woman, useless: the spark fails me.
> God! yet when the might of it all assails me
> It seems impossible that I cannot do it.
> Yet I cannot. They were right, and they all knew it
> Years ago, but I—never! I have persisted
> Blindly (they say) and now I am old. I have resisted
> Everything, but now, now the strife's ended.
> The fire's out; the old cloak has been mended
> For the last time, the soul peers through its tatters.

*Al Que Quiere* (The Four Seas Company, 1917) has a more decisive note. There are, in this volume, many pages that suggest a spiritual kinship with Kreymborg, a relation that is brought closer by the similarity of Kreymborg's staccato rhythms to the directions for a funeral which Williams has entitled "Tract," the delightful "Promenade," the alternately mocking and moving "History" (possibly the highest point attained in the book) and parts of "The Wanderer." It

is in *Al Que Quere* that Williams's expressionism first finds itself. The intensification of figure, the increased activity of the verb energize even the more quiescent moments. "Dawn" is typical. It begins:

> Ecstatic bird-songs pound
> the hollow vastness of the sky
> with metallic clinkings—
> beating color up into it.

One thinks of Edith Sitwell's metallic universe, her glassy skies, brass twigs, cardboard clouds—but Williams's world is a less static one. There is wind in it. And whimsy, a humor which is manifest, *alla burla,* in "Tract" and is reinforced by the lighter accents of "Good Night."

*Sour Grapes* (The Four Seas Company, 1921) is less unified, an advance in effort but a decline in power. Distrusting the whispers that have a quiet persuasiveness, the poet overcompensates by aggressively shouting at the top of his register. In his desire to free his mind of other things besides its trammels, Williams is unable to choose between experimental variety and the exhibition of eccentricities—and so gives both with smiling indiscrimination. One page offers the scrupulous arrangement of "Queen-Anne's-Lace," another confronts us with the blank absurdity of

> COMPLETE DESTRUCTION
>
> It was an icy day.
> We buried the cat,
> then took her box
> and set fire to it
> in the back yard.
> Those fleas that escaped
> earth and fire
> died by cold.

It is nothing short of a light-year from such hollow puerility (and it is not unmatched in *Sour Grapes*) to "Great Mullen," "A Celebration" and "A Goodnight" which, in spite of its pronounced Sandburgian echoes, has its own authenticity. This is the concluding half:

. . . . it is late, it is nineteen-nineteen—
go to sleep, night's cries are a lullaby;
his jabbering is a sleep-well-my-baby; he is
a crackbrained messenger.

The maid waking you in the morning
when you are up and dressing,
the rustle of your clothes as you raise them—
it is the same tune.
At the table the cold, greenish, split grapefruit, its juice
on the tongue, the clink of the spoon in
your coffee, the toast odors say it over and over.

The open street-door lets in the breath of
the morning wind from over the lake.
The bus coming to a halt grinds from its sullen brakes—
lullaby, lullaby. The crackle of a newspaper,
the movement of the troubled coat beside you—
sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep . . .
It is the sting of snow, the burning liquor of
the moonlight, the rush of rain in the gutters packed
with dead leaves: go to sleep, go to sleep.
And the night passes—and never passes—

In spite of moments which can be dignified by no greater term than silly, there is dignity in Williams. And, apart from his occasional exhibitionism, strength. One must be careful not to damn him for his struts and evasions, remembering the times when his honesties are both intense and straightforward.

# THE CEREBRALISTS

We know that the heresy of yesterday becomes the platitude of to-morrow, but that knowledge does not make it perceptibly easier for us to realize how quickly the most radical school or tendency grows *vieux jeu*. It is impossible for us to concede that the tentative experiments, the impudent attacks and the culminating revolt in which we fancied ourselves triumphant have hardened into a set of conventions which call for fresh assaults and even more violent revisions. We who were "the young men" a few years ago gaze with an incredulity, in which surprise and outrage are mingled, at a younger generation that not only knocks at our doors but threatens to batter down the very structure in which we were just beginning to feel comfortable. But let me change the militant metaphor and attempt to analyze the new alignment in a more explicit chronological manner.

Immediately prior to 1900, the literary tone of America was frigidly academic. Hovey and Carman with their lyrical "Off with the fetters!" had merely imposed another short-lived formula of escape. After the brief term of vagabondage, art in America, gorged with the fruits of a fast-multiplying materialism, sank back in a post-prandial torpor. The vigorous puritanism of the ministerial New Englanders was forgotten; the gospel, thinned and sweetened, was dispensed by a succession of shadows, gesturing with polite uniformity. The word of Hamilton Wright Mabie, Richard Watson Gilder, Henry Van Dyke, Robert Underwood Johnson was respected if not revered. The tradition

was the tradition of the earlier Cambridge group but it had grown harder, pedantic, dehumanized. It was a gentleman's, almost a schoolman's world that was reflected in the literature of this period: ornate, nostalgic, refined. It was from the very refinement of this aristocratic attitude that the now mature generation revolted with such vigor. The passionless precision sent youth hurtling to the opposite extreme of emotional disorganization. The time called for "Life! More life!" Romanticists and realists found themselves using each other's slogans. Leading the novelists, Dreiser and Anderson, leading the poets, Frost, Masters, Lindsay and Sandburg spoke with a democratic fervor; theirs was a passion not only for revelation but for communication. In their desire to talk directly to people, they, like most of their contemporaries, were concerned less with æsthetics than with instinct, more with feeling than with form.

It is against what seems to many of the young élite to be an undisciplined emotionalism that the latest generation is revolting. Seeing the immediate past and much of the present as a welter of ecstasies and inchoate naturalism, they respond to the full swing of the inevitable pendulum. They are all—or at least their manifestos are—for a new intellectual discipline, for severity of structure, for the subjection of the material to the design. Form is the word most often on the lips of these younger writers; they speak of the mathematics, the architecture of literature, of mass and planes, of suspensions, dissonances and modulations—of an abstract form, as a musician, despising the theatricalism of opera, might speak of absolute music. It is primarily a turning away from naturalism, a progression—or, as may be contended, a retrogression—to French ideas of a still earlier generation. Our newest "new men," with their aristocratic malaises seeking decorative avenues of escape, may well become a set of belated American Parnassians.

But there is this difference between the two periods: Frenchmen, since Flaubert, have adopted the theory that the purpose of art is to conceal art; the young American doctrinaires—and I am thinking chiefly of the more determined secessionists —believe that the function of art is to reveal art, carefully, consciously. This, it seems to me, explains their preoccupation with verbal craftsmanship and deliberate technic. The word æsthetic does not have for them, as it had for us, the connotations of Oscar Wilde and the delicately decadent nineties; they speak of a rigorous and crystallized æstheticism.

How far, one asks, can such a program carry them? As in the case of Pound who started his career with a burst of brilliance, is it not likely that an obsession with structure may lead to imaginative sterility? When emotion is minimized does not the artist suffer from a lassitude of the creative faculty? Even now, although it is scarcely fair to pass judgment on a group that is still fluid, one notes that most of its output has been critical. And this prompts a perplexity of fresh questions. If instinct is repudiated or impoverished can the intelligence be a sufficient substitute? Will not intellectual subtleties and nuances of form tend toward the very artistic decadence from which we have revolted, the decadence that appraises the values of life chiefly as æsthetic values?

It is too early to look for answers. But there are portents which, in themselves, suggest certain replies. The writers who try to make their work conform to a theory of "pure" or "absolute" art, forget that man comes to his creation dragging his impurities and backgrounds with him. Craving an insulating coolness, they seem unaware of the truism that art is founded on devotion not detachment. The artist on fire to make something is concerned first with what he wishes to express, second with the method of expression. When

the order is reversed, when the manner assumes primary importance, the result is technically adroit, fastidious, often sensitive but more often precious and artificial. This is the true minor note and it is here that decadence begins. The over-nice preoccupation with shades, the elaborate analysis of a spent emotion, the false emphasis on half-tones lead inevitably to verbal legerdemain and a series of elliptical vagaries. This tendency has already found a similarity of speech in the language of many of the "emerging" intellectuals. Highly euphuistic, their work seems determined to make four syllables blossom where only one grew before. It is essentially an intellectual circumlocution that fascinates many of the most recent experimenters. One of the youngest, Hart Crane, in an effort to avoid such a commonplace as "darkening dusk," speaks of

"the graduate opacities of evening."

It is these cold victories of the intellect that point to their own defeat. It is a return to the lifeless classicism which they would be the first to repudiate, a return with only a slight difference: instead of a literature written by scholars for scholars, the new mode seems to be attempting a poetry by artists for artists only. Scorning the old-fashioned prosody, they are fashioning a diction which is no less stilted, a new-fashioned rhetoric which, in spite of its scientific patois, is no less rhetorical.

Here one can chart the possible descent: artificiality of language, excitation of imagery, tenuous thoughts, obscurantism. It is only those who lack rich creative blood who lay stress on equivocal tropes and spend their slight energy exorcising the cliché while worshiping the nuance. Erudite Gratianos may surround their emotional poverty with verbal elegances, but their reasons "are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff; you shall seek all day ere you

find them; and, when you have them, they are not worth the search." The great workers are essentially simple and direct, never "secret or obscure"; as Emerson said, "they never seem to condescend."

It is this condescension, this effort to substitute intellectual elaboration for free creative vigor that is characteristic of many of the younger aristocrats who fear the modern world, who, like "Miniver Cheevy," weep that they were ever born and eye a khaki suit with loathing. One may understand them better by examining two of their archetypes, if not their gods, in greater detail.

## T. S. ELIOT

For several years prior to appearance in a volume, the scattered poems of T. S. Eliot were championed warmly by a few protagonists and condemned even more heatedly by many who suspected the young author of all things from charlatanry to literary anarchism. Those who read them talked of his work, not as poetry, but as a precipitant, a touchstone; they pronounced "Eliot" as though the name were either a shibboleth or a red flag. Controversy was difficult. For, with the exception of two longish poems and half a dozen scattered verses, this native of St. Louis continued to publish his occasional pieces in England and threatened at the age of thirty-one to take on the proportions of a myth.

To-day his influence, although exceedingly limited, is indisputable. And it is the more remarkable when one perceives that Eliot's first volume, *Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), contains just twenty-four examples, five of them being in French. In these two dozen pieces there can be heard, beneath muffled brilliancies, two strange and distinctive idioms. The first embodies the larger curve, the

more flexible music; in it are held the shifting complexities and nervous flicker of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prumrock" and the sensitized "Portrait of a Lady." The second accent is sharper, swifter, more obviously sparkling. A far more definite tone of voice, it lends itself so easily to imitation that its stinging inflection may be noticed in many of the younger British insurgents. Osbert Sitwell, whose anti-war verses may still be remembered, frankly models quatrains on the plan of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales." Herbert Read, another of the younger poets, echoes the strain with slight variations in his "Huskisson Sacred and Profane." Even Robert Nichols, turning from his precise Shakespearian sonnets, his academic nymphs and correctly apparelled English fauns, indites, "The Spring Song," the quatrains of which run like:

> Sinclair has bought a new top hat,
> A jetty coat and honey gloves,
> A cane topped by a glass-eyed cat,
> And Sinclair goes to meet his loves.
>
> Sinclair would make his muslin choice,—
> Spring and his father say he must:
> Corah has ankles and a voice,
> Nancy has French and a neat bust.

This is Eliot in words of one syllable—an Ollendorf paraphrase. It is but a step to the more acerb original. Here are two illustrative segments from Eliot himself:

> Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
> Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
> The zebra stripes along his jaw
> Swelling to maculate giraffe . . .
>
> Grishkin is nice: her Russian eye
> Is underlined for emphasis;
> Uncorseted, her friendly bust
> Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.

It is this vein that tempts Eliot most—and is his undoing. For irony, no matter how agile and erudite—and Eliot's is both—must contain heat if it is to burn. And fire is one of the elements that cannot be juggled by this acrobatic satirist. With amazing virtuosity, he balances and tosses fragments of philosophy, history, science, tea-table gossip, fetishes of literature. And only the intellectuals applaud. Simplicity is more foreign to Eliot than the mountains of the moon. His recondite euphuisms twist their length through tortuous lines. When he wishes to refer to the collection of "tainted money" in church, he writes:

> The sable presbyters approach
> The avenues of penitence;
> The young are red and pustular
> Clutching piaculative pence.

And these are the first two verses of "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," with what its author might call dialectical anfractuosities:

> Polyphiloprogenitive
> The sapient sutlers of the Lord
> Drift across the window-panes.
> In the beginning was the Word.
>
> In the beginning was the Word.
> Superfetation of τό ἓν
> And at the mensual turn of time
> Produced enervate Origen.

There are times when Eliot discards his flashing properties, changes his rarefied vocabulary for a more direct irony which it not only amusing but incisive. "The Hippopotamus," that audacious whimsicality, is an example, with its:

> The broad-backed hippopotamus
> Rests on his belly in the mud;
> Although he seems so firm to us
> He is merely flesh and blood.

Flesh-and-blood is weak and frail,
Susceptible to nervous shock;
While the True Church can never fail
For it is based upon a rock.

The hippo's feeble steps may err
In compassing material ends,
While the True Church need never stir
To gather in its dividends . . .

The hippopotamus's day
Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;
God works in a mysterious way—
The Church can sleep and feed at once.

I saw the 'potamus take wing
Ascending from the damp savannas,
And quiring angels round him sing
The praise of God, in loud hosannas.

Blood of the Lamb shall wash him clean
And him shall heavenly arms enfold,
Among the saints he shall be seen
Performing on a harp of gold.

He shall be washed as white as snow,
By all the martyr'd virgins kist,
While the True Church remains below
Wrapt in the old miasmal mist.

But at least two-thirds of Eliot's sixty-three pages attain no higher eminence than extraordinarily clever—and eminently uncomfortable—verse. The exaltation which is the very breath of poetry, that combination of tenderness and toughness, is scarcely ever present in Eliot's lines. Scarcely ever, I reiterate, for a certain perverse exultation takes its place; an unearthly light without warmth which has the sparkle if not the strength of fire. It flickers mockingly through certain of the unrhymed pictures and shines with a bright pallor out of the two major poems.

These two are the book's main exhibit, its jewelled medal-

lion. Medallion, too, in the sense that both of them complement each other, obverse and reverse. "The Portrait of A Lady," the franker and more swiftly communicable, is a half-sympathetic, half-scornful study in the impressionist manner of the feminine dilettante, the slightly-faded *précieuse* hovering tremulously on the verge of an abortive "affair."

> Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
> You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do—
> With "I have saved this afternoon for you";
> And four wax candles in the darkened room,
> Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
> An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
> Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.
> We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole
> Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.
> "So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
> Should be resurrected only among friends
> Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
> That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."
> —And so the conversation slips . . .

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is even more adroit though less outspoken. Nothing in contemporary poetry has achieved this vibration of ambiguous hurt and indefinite frustration. Sensitive to the pitch of concealment, this is an analysis of the lady's sexual opposite—an inhibited, young-old philanderer, tired of talk and the eternal tea-tables; a prey to boredom that breeds its own revulsion, a victim too sunk in himself to escape it. For him, eternally, it seems that

> In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo.

Prufrock would shatter the small talk, pierce the whispered inanities, cry out! But he can neither discharge his protest nor find words for it. He listens politely; he accepts the

proffered cup; he chatters on aimlessly. It is the quiet tragedy of inhibition, the *revolté* buried in the gentleman.

> No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
> Am an attendant lord, one that will do
> To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
> Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
> Deferential, glad to be of use.
> Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
> Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
> At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
> Almost, at times, the Fool.
>
> I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
> I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

But this volume is not compounded only of psychological involutions and the confused murmur of broken sentences. Eliot can be delicately fantastic when the mood is on him. He can use gray with depressing magic; he makes one face early morning with

> . . . the damp souls of housemaids
> Sprouting despondently at area gates.

He hears the laughter of Mr. Apollinax (who sounds suspiciously like Bertrand Russell) "tinkling among the tea-cups" and he thinks of

> . . . Priapus in the shrubbery
> Gaping at the lady in the swing.

He watches the fog rubbing its back upon the window-panes and, in an image that suggests Sandburg's poem on the same theme, sees

> The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
> Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
> Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
> Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
> Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
> And seeing that it was a soft October night,
> Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

But these are the exceptional moments. For the most part, Eliot cares less for his art than for his attitudes. Disdaining the usual poetic cant, he falls into another tradition; he leans towards a kind of versifying which, masquerading under the title of "occasional" or "social" verse may be found in many a *Lyra Elegantiarum.* Pliny had in mind this type when he wrote: "These pieces commonly go under the title of poetical amusements; but these amusements have sometimes gained as much reputation to their authors as works of a far more serious nature." And some two thousand years later, Locker-Lampson described their qualities again: "The tone should not be pitched too high; it should be terse and rather in the conversational key; the rhythm should be crisp and sparkling, the rhyme frequent and never forced. . ." Both Pliny and Locker-Lampson might have been reviewing Eliot's conversational ironies. For Eliot's gift is the poet's only at intervals. His quatrains, for the most part, are written in a new *genre* or, to be more accurate, in a modernization of a surprisingly old one. They are, primarily, a species of mordant light verse; complex and critical *vers de société.*

The publication of *The Waste Land* (Boni and Liveright, 1922) was the occasion for a controversy as bitter as that which signalled the appearance of *Spoon River Anthology.* On one hand, it was hailed as a poignant disclosure "not only of a personal distress, but the starvation of a whole civilization"; at the other extreme it was denounced as "a blithering assemblage of inane utterances," derided as a failure in futurism or treated, by the majority, as a glittering hoax. One fact predominated: no two of its critics agreed as to its meaning. The academicians, confronted with this forty-nine page poem, displayed nothing more critical than bad temper and spluttering expletives. The enthusiasts were scarcely more constructive: theirs was a release of some of

the most naïve superlatives that ever issued from publicly sophisticated iconoclasts. One of the clearest interpreters of the latter group, Edmund Wilson, Jr., furnished "The Dial" with *The Waste Land's* most readable libretto which he entitled "The Poetry of Drouth." Claiming that the poem is "simply one triumph after another" and that its author "belongs to the divine company," Mr. Wilson wrote:

> "Perhaps the best point of departure for a discussion of *The Waste Land* is an explanation of its title. Mr. Eliot asserts that he derived this title, as well as the plan of the poem 'and much of the incidental symbolism,' from a book by Miss Jessie L. Weston called *From Ritual to Romance. The Waste Land,* it appears, is one of the many mysterious elements which have made of the Holy Grail legend a perennial puzzle of folk-lore; it is a desolate and sterile country, ruled over by an impotent king, in which not only have the crops ceased to grow and the animals to reproduce their kind, but the very human inhabitants have become unable to bear children. The renewal of the Waste Land and the healing of the 'Fisher King's' wound depend somehow upon the success of the Knight who has come to find the Holy Grail.
>
> Miss Weston, who has spent her whole life in the study of the Arthurian legends, has at last propounded a new solution for the problems presented by this strange tale. Stimulated by Frazer's *The Golden Bough,* she has attempted to explain the Fisher King as a primitive vegetable god—one of those creatures who, like Attis and Adonis, is identified with Nature herself and in the temporary loss of whose virility the drouth or inclemency of the season is symbolized; and whose mock burial is a sort of earnest of his coming to life again . . .
>
> Now Mr. Eliot uses the Waste Land as the concrete image of a spiritual drouth. His poem takes place half in the real world—the world of contemporary London, and half in a haunted wilderness—the Waste Land of the mediæval legend; but the Waste Land is only the hero's arid soul and the intolerable world about him. The water which he longs for in the twilight dusk is to quench the thirst which torments him in the London dusk."

Granting this plan (and, in spite of the program, it is doubtful whether *The Waste Land* is anything but a set of separate poems upon which a scheme of unification has been arbitrarily—and unsuccessfully—imposed as an afterthought), it will be seen at once that this is a poetry not actuated by life but by literature. It is an anthology of assimilations—a poetry, as Mary M. Colum pointed out, "of interest to critics and people professionally interested in literature; it appeals to their sophisticated consciousness, whereas great literature appeals either to our subconscious or superconscious minds—that it, to something that either transcends our experience or is profoundly buried in our experience." Eliot's poetry does neither; it appeals only to our acquired knowledge. A book whose intelligibility relies on other books, that needs quotations in eight languages, that points (in a poem of less than four hundred lines) to thirty-odd sources for its disjected fragments and the reading of two works of anthropology to elucidate (I quote Eliot) "the difficulties of the poem"—such a work is not so much a creative thing as a piece of literary carpentry, scholarly joiner's work; the flotsam and jetsam of desiccated culture stuck together in the puzzle-picture manner of Pound's "Sordello-form" cantos. To most of those who are familiar with Eliot's earliest poems, *The Waste Land* must recall "the old man in a dry month, waiting for rain," and seem little more than an expansion of "Gerontion," plus a conglomeration of allusions which, in themselves, are fitful and bear the vaguest relation to each other. The opening lines of the poem reveal Eliot's curious and sometimes excellent juxtapositions:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

An examination of Eliot's method brings us back to a scrutiny of his more formal patterns which have taken on such singular contours. The qualities, apparent in the early verses which Eliot wrote as an undergraduate, and which endear him to the younger cerebralists, are an elaborate irony, a twitching disillusion, a persistent though muffled hyperæsthesia. In "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the extraordinarily sensitized "Portrait of a Lady," Eliot fused these qualities in a flexible music, in shifting implications of a speech that wavered dexterously between poetic color and casual conversation. In the greater part of *Poems,* however, Eliot employed a harder and more crackling tone of voice. He delighted in virtuosity for its own sake, in epigrammatic velleities, in a bitter and polysyllabic *vers de société.*

In *The Waste Land,* Eliot has attempted to combine these two contradictory idioms with a new complexity. The result —although, as I am aware, this conclusion is completely at variance with the judgment of its frenetic admirers—is a pompous parade of erudition, a lengthy extension of the earlier disillusion, a kaleidoscopic movement in which the

bright-colored pieces fail to atone for the absence of an integrated design. As an echo of contemporary despair, as a picture of dissolution, of the breaking-down of the very structures on which life has modeled itself, *The Waste Land* has a certain authenticity. But an artist is, by the very nature of creation. pledged to give form to formlessness; even the process of disintegration must be held within a pattern. This pattern is distorted and broken by Eliot's jumble of narratives, nursery-rhymes, criticism, jazz-rhythms, Dictionary of Favorite Phrases and a few lyrical moments. Possibly the disruption of our ideas may be reproduced through such a mélange, but it is doubtful whether it is crystallized or even clarified by a series of severed narratives—tales from which the connecting tissue has been carefully cut—and familiar quotations with their necks twisted, all imbedded in a formless plasma of associations that are clear only in Eliot's mind. Some of the intrusions are more irritating than incomprehensible. The unseen sailor in the first act of "Tristan and Isolde" is dragged in (without point or preparation) to repeat his *"Frisch weht der Wind"*; in the midst of a metaphysical dialogue, we are assured

> O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
> It's so elegant
> So intelligent.

Falling back on his earlier métier, Eliot does not disdain to sink to doggerel that would be refused admission to the cheapest of daily columns.

> When lovely woman stoops to folly and
> Paces about her room again, alone,
> She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,
> And puts a record on the gramaphone.

Elsewhere, the juxtaposition of Day, Andrew Marvell, Verlaine, Paul Dresser and others equally incongruous is more cryptic in intention and even more dismal in effect:

> But at my back from time to time I hear
> The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
> Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
> O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
> And on her daughter
> They wash their feet in soda water
> *Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*
>
> Twit twit twit
> Jug jug jug jug jug jug
> So rudely forc'd.
> Tereu

Dadaism, with its glorification of incoherence, is scarcely a step away. It is difficult to understand the presence of such cheap tricks in what its champions insist is "the finest poem of this generation." The mingling of wilful obscurity and weak burlesque compels us to believe that the pleasure which most of the admirers derive from *The Waste Land* is the same sort of gratification attained through having solved a puzzle, a form of self-congratulation. The absence of any verbal acrobatics from Eliot's prose, a prose that represents not the slightest departure from a sort of intensive academism, makes one suspect that, were it not for the Laforgue mechanism, Eliot's poetic variations on the theme of a super-refined futility would be increasingly thin and incredibly second rate.

*The Waste Land* is not only, however, a hash of Webster, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, the Bible, vaudeville ballads, Swinburne, Eliot's own poems, the Upanishads, etc. There are, in its splintered depths, moments of imaginative vigor. The realistic episode of the cockney girls is skilfully managed. Almost choked by the pretentious quotationist, there is a

mute anguish in the section entitled "Death by Water." Though Eliot's fondness for ellipsis becomes, too often, a trick that exposes itself, one is arrested by details as keen as the picture of the typist sick with *ennui,* as swift as the disposal of the house agent's clerk with one stroke like:

> One of the low on whom assurance sits
> As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.

As an analyst of psychic impotence, of dubious quiverings, as a recorder of the nostalgia of this age, Eliot has created something whose value is, at least, documentary. Yet, granting its occasional felicities, *The Waste Land* is a misleading document. The world distrusts illusions which the last few years have destroyed. One grants this latter-day truism. But it is groping among new ones: the power of the unconscious, an astringent scepticism, a mystical renaissance—these are some of the current illusions to which the Western World is turning for assurance of their, and its, reality. Man meets life with something more positive than an equivocal shrug; nor can an art persist that refuses to answer either yea or nay. Man may be desperately insecure, but he has not yet lost the greatest of his emotional needs, the need to believe in something—even in his disbelief. For an ideal-demanding race, there is always one more God—and Mr. Eliot is not his prophet.

## MARIANNE MOORE

Why, it has sometimes been asked, is the writing of Marianne Moore so regularly absent from most anthologies of contemporary American poetry? Why has she had to wait more than eight years for the publication of her first volume, and why, even then, has it been necessary for a few friends to "pirate" her work and bring out her one volume

in England? Why have critics applauded creations of far less originality while remaining silent concerning an idiom as unique, however difficult, as hers? There are, doubtless, several contradictory answers to these questions. My own prejudiced conclusion is that, while Miss Moore has elected to offer her highly intellectualized dissertations in the form of poetry, she is not, in spite of the pattern of her lines, a poet. It is not to be inferred from this dogmatic finality, that Miss Moore's acidulous quality is not admirable. On the contrary, all of her work displays a surface of flickering irony, a nimble sophistication beneath which glitter the depths of a cool and continually critical mind. Hers is witticism of a strange genre; but it remains witticism. It is the critic and the wit rather than the poet who can combine words and ideas (ideas which, in passing, are far from revolutionary) in such a pattern as:

PICKING AND CHOOSING

Literature is a phase of life: if
one is afraid of it, the situation is irremediable; if
one approaches it familiarly,
what one says of it is worthless. Words are constructive
when they are true; the opaque allusion—the simulated flight

upward—accomplishes nothing. Why cloud the fact
that Shaw is selfconscious in the field of sentiment but is
otherwise re-
warding? that James is all that has been
said of him but is not profound? It is not Hardy
the distinguished novelist and Hardy the poet, but one man

"interpreting life through the medium of the
emotions." If he must give an opinion, it is permissible that
the
critic should know what he likes. Gordon
Craig with his "this is I" and "this is Mine," with his three
wise men, his "sad French greens" and his Chinese cherries—
Gordon Craig, so

inclinational and unashamed—has carried
the precept of being a good critic, to the last extreme. And
Burke is a
psychologist—of acute, raccoon-
like curiosity. Summa diligentia;
to the humbug, whose name is so amusing—very young and
ve-

ry rushed, Cæsar crossed the Alps on the "top of a
diligence." We are not daft about the meaning but this
familiarity
with wrong meanings puzzles one. Humming-
bug, the candles are not wired for electricity.
Small dog, going over the lawn, nipping the linen and saying

that you have a badger—remember Xenophon;
only the most rudimentary sort of behaviour is necessary
to put us on the scent; a "right good
salvo of barks," a few "strong wrinkles" puckering the
skin between the ears, are all we ask.

When Miss Moore attempts to give her astringent lines more suavity by smoothing them with rhyme, she scarcely succeeds in musicality—if music is her aim. She does not appreciate the function of rhyme, its suppleness, its harmonic color, its ability to serve both as a tonal sting and emollient—it is doubtful if she even cares for it. Only a lack of caring (not a carelessness) could account for splitting a word like *superior* after the first syllable to force a rhyme with *to,* or making the first syllable of *accident* stand on a line by itself so that (in "The Fish") the last stanzas rhyme themselves thus:

ac-
cident—lack
of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns
and
hatchet strokes, these things stand
out on it; the chasm side is

dead.
Repeated
of evidence has proved that it can
live
on what cannot revive
its youth. The sea grows old in it.

Miss Moore delights in these eccentricities of design. If she hardens her ideas into a peculiar shapeliness, one is sure that the very act of shaping must have been hard. One is too conscious of her consciousness—everything is rigidly planned, distorted, squeezed into protesting structures; nothing moves freely, nothing is spontaneous or without strain. Even "To Statecraft Embalmed," possibly the most nearly orthodox and closely rhymed work Miss Moore has produced, shows the same refusal of the material to adapt itself to the form.

TO STATECRAFT EMBALMED

There is nothing to be said for you. Guard
Your secret. Conceal it under your "hard
Plumage," necromancer.
O
Bird, whose "tents" were "awnings of Egyptian
Yarn," shall Justice' faint, zigzag inscription—
Leaning like a dancer—
Show
The pulse of its once vivid sovereignty?
You say not, and transmigrating from the
Sarcophagus, you wind
Snow
Silence round us and with moribund talk,
Half limping and half ladified, you stalk
About. Ibis, we find
No
Virtue in you—alive and yet so dumb.
Discreet behavior is not now the sum
Of statesmanlike good sense.
Though

It were the incarnation of dead grace?
As if a death mask ever could replace
  Life's faulty excellence!
    Slow
To remark the steep, too strict proportion
Of your throne, you'll see the wrenched distortion
  Of suicidal dreams.
    Go
Staggering toward itself and with its bill,
Attack its own identity, until
  Foe seems friend and friend seems
    Foe.

There are, it should be added, many poetic fragments embedded in these geometrical studies. Miss Moore's observation is vivid and whimsical; she sees the elephants "with their fog-colored skin," the zebras "supreme in their abnormality," the "crow-blue mussel shells." But practically all the contents of *Poems* (The Egoist Press, London, 1921) are essays in the disguise of verse, arguments or statements which seem continually to be seeking their prose origins.

I see that I have involved myself in the snares of that tangled problem which concerns a definition of poetry. The effort to fix this fluctuant power in a phrase usually ends either in a hopelessly vatic gesture or a reckless leaping from one generality to another. In common with most definers, I am driven to adopt both methods and to insist that, whatever else poetry may lack, it must have its roots in ecstasy, that it differs from pedestrian prose in the lift, the exaltation, the moment of rapture. This "lift" may be inherent in its subject; it may be evoked by the intensity of a communicated emotion or by a combination of verbal precision and musical passion. It starts, as Robert Frost has already been quoted as saying, "with a lump in the throat, a homesickness or a love-sickness. It is an effort to find ful-

filment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought—and the thought has found the words." It may have its basis in an idea, but it must reach out to something more. This something more is what seems to be lacking, not only in the cerebral lines of Miss Moore, but in the work of an entire unorganized though recognizable group. Although its products may be diverse, its hall-marks are identical: intellectual dexterity, technical preciosity and a tone that alternates between obscurity and condescension. In a controversial review of Waldo Frank's *City Block,* Kenneth Burke illuminates our indecision from a somewhat more acute angle. Speaking for his group, Mr. Burke says, "If we have to choose between an artist who is passionless and clever, and an artist who is tumultuous and non-clever . . . the former would be nearer to art."

If one is prepared to grant this dictum, if there can be a poetry without passion—and one could as easily imagine a music without sound—Miss Moore's achieves a special sort of distinction. Hers is no loose structure of fortunate or faltering phrases; the form of her expression is as clenched as her thought. But the critical faculty predominates. If, for example, one compares Miss Moore's poem to George Moore with her prose diagnosis of the same subject, one finds it difficult to understand why this analyst writes so little in what seems to be her native medium. Nothing short of a perversity of choice explains the selection of the shape of poetry for subjects and titles like "Pedantic Literalist," "You Are Like the Realistic Product of an Idealistic Search for Gold at the Foot of the Rainbow," "Poetry," "In the Days of Prismatic Color," " 'He Wrote the History Book,' It Said," "Diligence is to Magic as Progress is to Flight." "In this Age of Hard Trying Nonchalance is Good And—." The pages devoted to these curious designs establish a mood of critical, half-scornful cleverness. But do they furnish

a poetic communication? Are they, to ask the question which prompted this inquiry, related by anything more than their apparel to poetry? In spite of his admiration for Miss Moore's recondite brilliance, at least one reader is compelled to answer in the negative.

V

# NATIVE RHYTHMS

Any doubt of the growth of a characteristically American poetry is dispelled by a study of the diversity of contemporary writing. Instead of one thin stream, there are a dozen rushing currents; instead of conformity to a single tradition, there are a score of new influences to which the next generation can give its divided allegiance. As the country has begun to mature, the poets have grown with it —even geographically. Boston is no longer the literary center of America; every crossroads has its local laureate. Poets are recording not only their own differences but the variety of their backgrounds—New England claims Frost (originally of California), Robinson and Amy Lowell; the Middle West points to Sandburg, Lindsay, Masters; the Far West boasts of George Sterling, Charles Erskine Scott Wood; Fletcher hails from Little Rock, Arkansas, H. D. from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Edna Millay spent her childhood in Maine, Sara Teasdale lived hers in St. Louis; New York, which has gathered so many of those born elsewhere, reared Kreymborg, Benét, Wheelock; even the South (despite Mencken's offhand disposal of it as "the Sahara of the Bozart") has its quota: Bodenheim comes from Natchez, Mississippi, Aiken from Savannah, Georgia. The very racial colors of these names—the medley of clans and nationalities—are sufficient evidence of the fact that America has become a melting-pot in a literary as well as an ethnic sense.

## THE AFRAMERICAN

Not limited to the strains of the white race, recent native poetry has been colored by a strong infusion of black and red. African sculpture has made a powerful impress on the art of our day. American music reflects, in an increasing strength, the savage insistence of Congo drum beats as well as the syncopated poignance of our Southern spirituals —stark rhythms which Lindsay was the first to exploit in verse. In sociology the negro has begun to be his own interpreter. W. E. Burghart Du Bois has made two important contributions to the psychology of the suppressed race in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*. Benjamin Brawley, author of that excellent handbook, *A Short History of the English Drama,* has done splendid pioneer's work with his *The Negro in Art*.

In literature the field is more uneven. In *belles lettres,* criticism and purely creative work, the negro seems to suffer from an inhibition that prevents him from expressing his own emotions. Instead of giving free rein to a vision sharply differentiated from that of his white compatriots, he is, too often, content to ape their gestures, their inflections— too anxious to imitate with a stammering complaisance their own imitations. Instead of being proudly race conscious, he is too often merely self-conscious.

*The Book of American Negro Poetry* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922) is a record of the successes as well as the failures of the American negro (or, as James Weldon Johnson, the editor, prefers to call him, the Aframerican) as poet. Here are lyrics as native, as genuinely emotional, as "A Death Song" and "Little Brown Baby," by Paul Laurence Dunbar, and here, also, are verses as maudlin and imitative as "Ships That Pass in the Night" by the same

writer. Here are rhapsodies as passionate as "A Litany of Atlanta," by W. E. Du Bois, and quatrains as cryptic as the obviously Robinsonian echoes of that ardent anthologist, William Stanley Braithwaite. Fenton Johnson adopts, without hesitation or apology, Masters's Spoon River idiom, but his angry intensity is his own.

The outstanding discoveries of this collection are two, and they are less familiar—even to their own race. They are Claude McKay and Anne Spencer. McKay, whose own volume, *Harlem Shadows* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), makes no attempt to please a white audience by the affectation of dialect, does not disguise either himself or his poetry. His lines are saturated with a people's passion; they are colored with a mixture of bitterness and beauty. Though such sonnets as "The Harlem Dancer" are sharply conceived, McKay's quieter and idyllic moments are less noteworthy; his muse is more characteristic when she is rebellious. This singer, however, does not mistake polemics for poetry; he knows how to evoke a power of communication without shouting. "The Lynching" proves this. So does the impulsive "To the White Fiends," and this significant outcry, written during an epidemic of race riots:

IF WE MUST DIE

If we must die—let it not be like hogs,
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us still be brave,

And, for their thousand blows, deal one death blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but—fighting back!

Anne Spencer's work sounds the other extreme of the gamut. Her verse is remarkably restrained, closely woven, intellectually complex. "The Wife-Woman" and "Translation" are steeped in a philosophy that has metaphysical overtones. But there is a racial opulence, an almost barbaric heat in the color of her lines.

## THE AMERINDIAN

In its efforts to sound all indigenous notes, to exploit its own folk-stuff, America has not only recognized the plainsman as poet (*vide* John A. Lomax's excellent collection, *Cowboy Songs and Ballads,* and Louise Pound's researches) but has at last discovered its red man or, as Mary Austin insists upon calling him, the Amerindian. The pioneer's original estimate has been modified to a surprising degree; a good Indian, according to his recent interpreters, is not a dead Indian but a singing one. Fragmentary reports of the Amerind's culture have come to us and a few careful evaluations. But we have been offered singularly little in a creative way by the protagonists of the red man. Much of this is due to the tremendous gap between the languages. Translation, at the best, is a difficult and ungrateful performance for both interlocutor and audience. But the translating of primitive folk songs and aboriginal chants is an even more hazardous matter. So much that is idiomatic escapes or is distorted or is, most often, entirely misunderstood. A word out of place, even when it is apprehended, may need a chapter of explanations; an uncertain phrase or a peculiarity of tone may mean nothing to any one

but the singer and his tribe who carry the connotations with them. I recall, in this conection, the various versions one small sentence went through before it attained intelligibility. In an Indian song, a certain phrase was repeated several times. Its crudeness puzzled the translator who finally rendered it: *"I wear bad shoes."* This meant nothing in the context, so the phrase was changed to: *"My shoes hurt me."* Still dissatisfied, the adapter showed it to an old Indian, who smiled and said nothing. After a while the venerable red man explained that the song was an ancient gambling tune, that the game it celebrated was played with moccasins and a stone or small nut—our shell game was possibly a variation of it—and that the queer phrase, literally and figuratively, was: *"I use wicked shoes!"*—the line being a taunting challenge, a come-on, uttered very much in the spirit of our slang, "He shuffles a wicked deck of cards."

In spite of the hazards of adapting the idiom of the one native unit that has defied assimilation, brave attempts have been made by Natalie Curtis Burlin (author of the invaluable collection, *The Indians' Book*), Constance Lindsay Skinner, Alice Fletcher and Alice Corbin Henderson to re-express the spirit of the original songs and chants. There even has been a large anthology of the poetic forms "of a vanishing race," *The Path on the Rainbow,* edited by George W. Cronyn (Boni and Liveright, 1918). But the two workers in this field who have plowed deepest are Mary Austin and Lew Sarett. Mary Austin's *The American Rhythm* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), besides containing many of her own poetic reëxpressions, is an extended essay in the roots of endemic rhythm. Mrs. Austin even claims that, as the plains and hills have shaped the contours of aboriginal *vers libre,* so our poetry "must inevitably take the mold of Amerind verse, which is the mold of the American experience shaped by the American environment."

Lew Sarett has been (and, for several months of the year, still is) a woodsman and guide in the Northwest. His close contacts with the Chippewas has enabled him to render the Indian subjectively as well as objectively. This duality of treatment gives Sarett's work an unusual expressiveness: we see the Indian, from without, trying to establish a communication with a white world; we move within him, sharing his heritage, his pathos and (a characteristic left unmentioned by most of the Indian's interpreters) his irony. In *Many Many Moons,* with an Introduction by Carl Sandburg (Henry Holt and Company, 1920), the spirit of the wilderness is caught in Sarett's free renderings of tribal songs and ceremonies. "The Blue Duck" is a brilliant evocation of a medicine dance; "Little Caribou Makes 'Big Talk'" is an equally successful record of a council speech. *The Box of God* (Henry Holt and Company, 1922) is a still richer collection, moving with elemental rhythms and more than the suggestion of the peculiar intervals between the full tones of Indian music. The title-poem is Sarett's finest accomplishment; a poignant monologue, interrupted by dialect which has unusual dignity, on the search for a greater God. In the illumination of the Indian's pantheism against the white man's darkened rituals, there is a breadth which not even the most careful transliterations in the Smithsonian Institution can approximate. The "Maple-Sugar Chant," less emotional, is scarcely less vivid, and the section "Red Gods," though on a lower creative plane, contains the crackling "Thunderdrums," from which I quote one of the swift lyrics.

Over and under
The shaking sky,
The war-drums thunder
When I dance by!—

LEW SARETT

Ho! a warrior proud,
I dance on a cloud,
For my ax shall feel
The enemy reel;
My heart shall thrill
To a bloody kill,—
Ten Sioux dead
Split open of head!—
Look! to the West!—
The sky-line drips,—
Blood from the breast!
Blood from the lips!
Ho! when I dance by,
The war-drums thunder
Over and under
The shaking sky.
Beat, Beat on the drums,
For the Tunderbird comes.
*Wuh!*
*Wuh!*

## IN "AMERICAN"

From the oldest American language to the newest. From the long rolling cadences of the wilderness to the brisk iambics of a motor-driven civilization; from prairie whispers and mountain sonorities to the jazz jargon of city-streets . . . In John V. A. Weaver, shop-girls, drug-clerks, freshman "sports" and flappers find their laureate. But Weaver is not to be considered merely because of his idiomatic novelty; he is not a pioneer in the use of the vernacular as a medium for verse. James Whitcomb Riley and Eugene Field anticipated him by employing Hoosier dialect for serious themes. T. A. Daly has achieved a still greater flexibility in an adroit Italian-American *patois*. Even in his special field of slang, Weaver has had his forerunners; his feat of writing sonnets in the American vulgate is not as much of a *tour*

*de force* as might be imagined. More than twenty years ago, Gelett Burgess paid an eloquent tribute to *The Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum* (1901) by Wallace Irwin which is like Weaver's work, slang accentuated and which, moreover, is a strict sequence, technically precise in form, although the subject-matter is trashy. After listening to the purists who are still horrified at H. L. Mencken's pæan to our extremely elastic language, it may be interesting to hear the voice of Mr. Burgess coming to us clairvoyantly from the silence of 1901. "The twentieth century," said Burgess in his forgotten Introduction, "breaks with a new promise of emancipation to English Literature, for a new influence has freshened the blood of conventional style that, in the decadence of the End of the Century, had grown dilute. This adjuvant strain is found in the enthusiasm of Slang. Slowly its rhetorical power has won foothold in the language. It has won many a verb and substantive, it has conquered idiom and diction, and now it is strong enough to assault the very syntax of our Anglo-Saxon tongue."

Before leaving Burgess, I purloin another paragraph which tries to establish a connection between poetry and *argot*.

> "Slang, the illegitimate sister of Poetry, makes with her a common cause against the utilitarian economy of Prose. They both stand for lavish luxuriance in trope and involution, for floriation and adornment of thought. It is their boast to make two words bloom where one grew before Both garb themselves in Metaphor; and the only complaint of the captious can be that whereas Poetry follows the accepted style, Slang dresses her thought to suit herself in fantastic and bizarre caprices, that her whims are unstable and too often in bad taste."

Weaver's chief contribution is this—his verse seldom tries to be humorous; it is indeed solemn and, not infrequently, sentimental. There is no slap-stick in his lines:

the "low-brows" of whom he writes are not comic either to themselves or to the reader. "It was Weaver," Mencken writes in *The American Language*, "who first directed attention to the fact that the American proletariat carries on his most lofty and sentimental thought in the same tongue he uses in discussing baseball."

Weaver's *In American* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) is best when it is raciest. When Weaver attempts to put his frail conceits in straight "English," the result is neither fish nor flesh nor good red lyrics. For the most part, his matter is as earnest, his "plot" as unflinching as his manner is flippant. The verbal grimaces cannot obscure the seriousness of the situations in "Mame," "White Collars," "Drug Store," (a swiftly drawn picture), "Concerning Pikers." The succeeding volume, *Finders* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), is still less dependent on its grammatical dislocations The consistent and accurate perversion of English is the same, but the perishable slang ("darb," "frog-skin," "my cat's ankle!") is not so prevalent. The longer poems, "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em," "Erma," "Concerning the Economic Independence of Women" (in spite of its atrocious title) are arresting, first of all, because they are not only good slang but good stories. Weaver has read enough to make him suspicious of his sentimentality, but he has not read too much to make him guilty of imitation. The following sonnet, though by no means the best single piece in *Finders*, reveals both the method and the tone of speech which Weaver has made very much his own:

GHOST

I'm comin' back and haunt you, don't you fret.
What if I get as far as Hell away?
They's things of me that just can't help but stay—
Whether I want or not, you can't forget.

Just when you think you got me wiped out clear,
  Some bird that's singin'—moonlight on a hill—
  Some lovely thing'll hurt like it would kill,
And you'll hear somethin' whisperin', "He's here!"

And when somebody holds you closte, like this,
  And you start in to feel your pulses race,
  The face that's pressin' yours'll be my face . . .
My lips'll be the ones your lips'll kiss.
Don't cry . . . which do you think it'll hurt most?—
Oh, God! You think I want to be a ghost? . . .

Both volumes, for all their emphasis on the physical scene, are not without spiritual invocations. There is striving here, the conflict of the artist torn between the necessity of facing a mechanistic world and the desire to escape to some sphere of smooth colors, undisturbed quiescence. It is this impulse to escape which is Weaver's chief danger; he is prone to be too "soft," too closely related to the weakest of his characters. It is a sympathy which is his greatest limitation. If he can discard the tone which listens to and likes its own tremolo, Weaver may well lift his next volume to a higher plane than that attained by those which he has written.

# OTHER VOICES

It would be pleasant to conclude this volume with a literary round-up, a showing of all the other poets neglected in the previous chapters. But that, in anything but an encyclopedic work, would be impossible. If such an effort were to be made, the roll-call would have to include not merely the hundreds of professional writers of verse but the experts in prose who have distinguished themselves in both mediums. The strength of the poetic impulse has not only shaped the contours of James Branch Cabell's genealogical narratives and prompted the thinly disguised meters in *Jurgen* and *Figures of Earth* but caused Cabell to publish *From the Hidden Way,* a volume of seventy-five poems "adapted" from various minnesingers whose lines exist only in the versions of their "translator." Sherwood Anderson is another whose rhythms reach across the prose borders of his tales and whose rhapsodic mysticism found a vent in *Mid-American Chants.* Other novelists have expressed a deep part of themselves in poetry: Willa Cather offers us her first published work with later verses in *April Twilights,* Robert Nathan presents the charming lyrics in *Youth Grows Old,* Gamaliel Bradford, best known as a biographer, condenses, in *Shadow Verses,* the same keenness which intensifies his historical portraits. Even the critical Mencken, whose judgments make him appear anæsthetic to all poetry, first made his bow with a volume of ballades and triolets coyly entitled *Ventures into Verse.*

Lacking the amplitude of the Britannica, this concluding chapter cannot consider the merits of those who should

receive at least an honorable mention. Instead, it will attempt nothing more than an emphasis on the divergence of contemporary poetry, especially as this variety is exemplified in the contrasted work of a few who have only recently appeared upon the horizon.

Raymond Holden is still little more than a name to many readers and less than that to most. Yet, disdaining the gambit in which the pawns of "promise" and "performance" are tentatively advanced, *Granite and Alabaster* (The Macmillan Company, 1922) is unquestionably one of the most distinguished first books put forward by the new generation of poets. It is, first of all, that rare fusion of the thing seen with the thing imagined; the incidents may not be real but there is no questioning the validity of the emotion which dramatizes them. It is a thoughtful world that Holden inhabits—and projects—a world of questioning rocks and introspective skies, of gnarled color and knotted strength. His is a region in which nothing can remain soft or smooth, a world in which there is considerably more granite than alabaster. A condensed intellectual vigor pervades Mr. Holden's work; even his lyrics have continual philosophic overtones.

PROSPECT

The eagle hangs so close I see a stir
Of ragged feathers fronting the strong wind
And in the blue beyond where my limbs were
This very morning, colors strangely thinned
With downward distance which are intervals
Full of green stands of grass and pastures cropped
By much diminished cattle, threads of walls
And shiny runs of streams that seem to have stopped.
Only the steady eagle is above me
Hanging in the wind that goes blowing by.
It is as if the earth were trying to shove me

Like a finger upward into the tall sky.
And I could be the finger but for a strange
Disturbing tactiturnity in the mass
Of living forest, a silence in the change
Of light across it where cloud shadows pass
Which seems to mean, What can a man point out,
A man whose blood is watered so with doubt?

This brooding uncertainty gnaws at all Holden sees or remembers. In a haunting soliloquy, "Spring Building," he writes:

Not from the carpenter, but from the things
Men never know of men I look away.

It is a somber accent of speculation, a wondering doubt that holds us in the sonnet "Once," in the minor key of "Lost Water," in the "wind-walled quietness" of "Night Above the Tree Line," even in the eight tiny lines of "Snow."

Last night a brooding cloud
Of undecided mist
Lay on the mountain pasture
And the brooks were loud.

Now running waters lie
Faint as far bells
Under a soft white silence
And the birds ask why.

Because of Holden's desire to make his New England settings carry philosophical burdens, it may be inferred that his poems are related to those of Robert Frost by something more than geography, and Holden would, in all probability, be the last to deny the influence. Indeed, there are times when the very accent of Frost's voice rises from the pages of *Granite and Alabaster*. "Sugaring," a splendid evocation, reads like a hitherto unpublished segment from

*North of Boston;* "Firewood" has the identical musing ascent and dying fall of *Mountain Interval.* One of the most characteristic poems in the volume ends in the unmistakably Frostian idiom:

> So much for circuses or for any event.
> The coming away is the reality.
> The coming to one's self is what is meant.

But the indebtedness to Frost is not so great that Holden is bankrupt of individuality. Curiously enough, Holden maintains his personality even when he seems most under the spell of his mentor. His intonation may be faltering, his intensities are always his own. Although the poet's control of his medium is usually apparent, his music is strangely uncertain. For the most part his sentences move with ease but, in the midst of verbal precision, he composes phrases as difficult and ugly as "a shamed swift wish" and "swift feet flash"; his hand—his left hand, obviously—can allow such banal *gaucheries* as "rich silence," "rare mystery," "silver pain." Such lapses are infrequent; they are, moreover, totally absent from the two dramatic narratives which are the volume's twin eminences. "Rock Fowler" is illuminated by natural description and spiritual implications; the more extended story, "The Durhams," is remarkable both for its strength of feeling and its delicacy of delineation. Here is a tale of a farmer who, suddenly faced with the infidelity of his mate, loses his mind and later, in the confusion of ecstasy, mistakes her for "the rare white doe" of his woods, fires at the apparition and—

> Old Durham staggered out into the snow
> Helped by the proud unbending trunks of trees
> Up toward the place where there should be a doe
> White as the snowflakes of a Winter breeze.
> And then the images came back again—

The irksome man came striding into his brain
And the white woman lay upon the ground.
Then something flashed. He fell without a sound.

This is a story that might easily have been theatricalized in the telling. Mr. Holden, however, with admirable restraint, has given us the bewildered spirit of the old man, blundering on the border-line of insanity, pathetically submerged, roused suddenly by

a woman's pair of shoes
Down at the heel and broken at the toes.
He dropped the rags and let the shoes fall, too,
And stood and stared at them as if they told
Some old forgotten thing and were a clue
To dishes and cold stove and the storm's cold.

It is such closely-knit details that make one wonder whether Holden's early power will find its fulfillment in the philosophical lyric or in the dramatic portrayal of character. He may—and his volume hints of such a possibility—effect a union of his gifts. One waits the outcome with unusual anticipation.

Herbert S. Gorman's *The Barcarole of James Smith* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922) is another outstanding first volume. To say the worst of Gorman's poetry at once—for the defects are so obvious that, unless they are disposed of first, they are likely to obscure the very definite qualities that distinguish him—the form of almost half his book is frankly derivative. Gorman, it is evident, has worshiped at the dissimilar shrines of E. A. Robinson and T. S. Eliot, and a great part of his book is a record of his efforts to join both gods—and free himself from them. The first page is chiefly Eliot, or rather a mirthless parody of his mordant quatrains.

In Ethiopia, the sun
Shines forever. Cinnamon
And aromatics spice the air,
And Candace is black and rare.

The Troglodytes in caverns dwell;
The Macrobii with long years swell;
The Ichthyophagi eat fish;
But Candace is all my wish.

Several of the succeeding poems acknowledge the identical influence; even the titles are in the same key as the one developed by the author of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales." Instead of Eliot's "Bleistein with a Cigar" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," we have Gorman's "The Melody of Patrick Murphy" and "Einstein Practises." The Robinsonian indebtedness is more deeply felt though less pronounced; it is sensed rather than seen. Only in one or two of the lyrics and in one lengthy blank verse monologue is the reader forced to recognize the obligation. Robinson's famous "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" is the most eloquent portrait of Shakespeare ever written in verse; Gorman, in exactly the same form, writes a long soliloquy entitled "The Son of Dawn" and attempts to do the very thing for Christopher Marlowe.

So much for the debits. The credit side of the ledger shows a decided balance in Gorman's favor. Here is a lyric strength rising from intellectual ferment. Some of the verses reprinted from the tentative pamphlet called "The Fool of Love," are equally searching. Not quite as somber as Holden, Gorman delights in tenebrous analyses of passion. It is a dark lyricism that impels "The Mandrake Root," that prompts the troubled music of "The Warning," "Rainy Night," and "Love's Fanatic." There are half a dozen others equally original—"The Intolerable Procession"

is one of the sharpest—but I quote "Love's Fanatic" which illustrates Gorman's choice of epithet and his ironic tensity.

Well, here it is: you call for me: I come,
But with an eagerness not quite my own,
Propelled by that decisive martyrdom
That pleased the saints upon their faggot-throne.

You see them smiling in the cruel flame
That exquisitely licks their willing limbs.
And finding some sad pleasure in the game
Not quite embodied in their lusty hymns.

And so I come: and though I go, be sure
That I will come again tomorrow, too,
And, Love's fanatic, hasten to endure
That littleness that is so great in you.

I am the weakling of that helpless strength
That throws this broken body you despise
Before your carelessness, to find at length
The faith that sleeps behind your faithless eyes.

Babette Deutsch's *Banners* (George H. Doran Company, 1919), another remarkable firstling, likewise contains recognizable echoes. But the volume is anything but a whispering gallery of the poet's admirations. The obvious influences have been well assimilated if not gestated, so that Miss Deutsch's verses—and particularly her later meditations—are emotionally provocative and intellectually convincing. If she can commit an atrocity like "Safe in sleep's umber envelope of peace," she can compensate with the stirring title-poem, the vigor of "The Challenger," the sensitive sonnets, and the ease of her freely rhymed irregular lines in "The Death of A Child," and "Distance." It is a nervous, high-spirited, ardent temperament that is revealed in these poems and in such a restrained love-lyric as:

SONGS

I would make songs for you:
Of slow suns weighing
Thru pale mist to the river, overlaying
Gold upon silver tissue; or the hush
Of winter twilight when the bushes quiver
Blooming with birds;
Of the easy snow;
Of patient streets, or the theatric glow
Of lamps on crowding faces in the night;
Of sudden gay encounters without words;
Of sorrow quiet in a huddled fight;
Of the release of April winds;
Of death,
That is a stillness without peace,—
Like love, wherefor I am so dumb to you.

Aline Kilmer is another who employs a cool technic that never freezes its emotion; she holds "with those who favor fire." *Candles That Burn* (George H. Doran Company, 1919) and *Vigils* (George H. Doran Company, 1921) have a warmth, an almost personal glow, that brightens her slender compositions. Hers is not a leaping passion that showers sparks or burns with excess of heat; it is a domesticated flame, a quiet hearth-fire. And by its light, her interior world is revealed with a quaintly individualized grace. Even —perhaps it would be better to say especially—the poems about her children are sharply characterized; "The Touch of Tears," "Song Against Children," "To a Child Shut in a Bedroom" are not at all like what one has received from the imitators of Stevenson and the Eugene Fieldian exploiters of the defenceless young.

Mrs. Kilmer's more ambitious lines are similarly unaffected. Nor is she without a playful brightness. The flicker of wit often lifts and illuminates what, in the work of a more sentimental lyricist, would be nothing more than

a cosy amiability. The light dexterity of "Unlearning," the banter of "Perversity," the self-satire of "Tour de Force," the clean fervor of "Things"—all these reveal Aline Kilmer as a distinct poetic personality. I quote a part of the last of these.

THINGS

Sometimes when I am at tea with you
I catch my breath
At a thought that is old as the world is old
And more bitter than death.

It is that the spoon that you just laid down
And the cup that you hold
May be here shining and insolent . .
When you are still and cold . . .

So let moth and dust corrupt and thieves
Break through and I shall be glad,
Because of the hatred I bear to things
Instead of the love I had.

For life seems only a shuddering breath,
A smothered, desperate cry,
And things have a terrible permanence
When people die.

Though Leonora Speyer's *A Canopic Jar* (E. P. Dutton and Company, 1921) is a first volume, it is the work of a mature woman ripe in experience. In spite of many grave measures, Mrs. Speyer's Muse is a fanciful one. She luxuriates in whimsical conceits like "A Crabbed Song of Spring," "Lover of Children," "First Snow on the Hills," in figures like

The trees are God's green alphabet. . . .
And every star and bird
Repeats in dutiful delight His word,
And every blade of grass
Flutters to class.

She thinks of the locust's "hot voice that seems to burn its way through the air like a pointed flame of sound"; she sees "the little clouds all in white" at the first Communion, kneeling "to receive the moon."

But Mrs. Speyer's images are not always playful. There is a grim, almost a grotesque edge to fantasies like "The Pet." And "The Ladder," her finest sonnet, sounds the masochistic note with unforgettable vividness.

I had a sudden vision in the night,
I did not sleep, I dare not say I dreamed,—
Beyond my bed a pallid ladder gleamed
And lifted upward toward the sky's dim height;
And every rung shone strangely in that light,
And every rung a woman's body seemed,
Outstretched, and down the sides her long hair streamed,
And you, you climbed that ladder of delight!

You climbed, sure-footed, naked rung by rung,
Clasped them and trod them, called them by their name,
And my name too I heard you speak at last;
You stood upon my breast the while and flung
A hand up to the next! And then—oh shame—
I kissed the foot that bruised me as it passed.

In 1917, a youth in his early twenties, a railroad telegrapher on the outskirts of Zanesville, Ohio, had a crude paper-pamphlet of thirty pages prepared by the local printer. It was called *First Poems* by Edwin Curran—subsequently these verses, with others more recent, were reprinted in his volume *Poems* (The Four Seas Company, 1919)—and its cardboard cover bore this legend: "Reviewers please include address of author and price of book (35 cents, postpaid) in notices. Author is 25, unmarried, a beginner and needs publisher. If this volume meets expenses, another, possibly better, will be issued." . . . One turns the pages expecting to find something in the Sweet Singer of Michigan vein,

some new burlesque epic *à la* J. Gordon Coogler or James Byron Elmore. And then one is stopped by such lines as:

> We have not died. . . . Your harp is playing still;
> I see the moon go spinning up Troy sky,
> While stars shake out to music down their hill
> And all the clarion trumpets whistle by.

In the midst of versifying of the most mediocre type, there are lines of the most astonishing vigor. Scarcely any one poem is an artistic success, but brilliant phrases burst upon one with the suddenness of an exploding rocket. "First Frost" has this arresting passage:

> For now an arm swings near and far
> The brittle lamp of every star.
> The flowers grow in the garden pied
> Velvet, imperial, laughing-eyed,
> While on them hovers a cold breath,
> The whistling frost of silver death.
> I grieve to see the wine-red crowd
> And watch and watch them, tall and proud,
> And tell them that tonight death comes,
> Beating the stars like kettle drums.

In "Autumn" he sees earth going to battle with her muscles bared; a gust of affirmation that sings through such an octave:

> The music of the autumn wind sings low,
> Down by the ruins of the painted hills,
> Where death lies flaming with a marvelous glow,
> Upon the ash of rose and daffodils.
> But I can find no melancholy here,
> To see the naked rocks and thinning trees,
> Earth strips to grapple with the winter year;
> I see her gnarled hills plan for victories!

Elsewhere there is less strangeness and potency. Curran's pages are a jumble of incoherence, passion, platitude, bad

grammar and exaltation. Nothing that I have read in years has seemed so much the result of sheer inspiration and poor schooling. There is little or no critical perception here, only a blind response to a mood that sweeps the singer as if he were an unconscious instrument. This poet has practically no control over the music; it controls him. Observe the quietly ecstatic "To Future Generations," the related love-songs scattered without title through the booklet, the music and glorified whimsicality of

> Watch! said my soul, and I looked on the world;
> The moon fell down its golden well, a flower;
> Its exquisite and lovely petals curled;
> And all the stars rained in a silver shower.
> Hear! said my soul, the whistle in the gale.
> And listening, came the tapping bells afar
> And sweeping strings of God's immortal nightingale
> Perched on a bough—or was it on a star?

This brightness of speech is manifest everywhere. It leaps out of such uneven poems as "Soldier's Epitaph" and "Sailing of Columbus" in lines like

> "We climbed the slippery alleys of the sea."

and

> "The stars, like bells, flash down the silver sky;
> Ringing like chimes on frozen trees, or cry
> Along the marble ground."

Curran's *Second Poems* (1920) show a decided falling-off. Most of the new volume is rhetoric, and rhetoric of a rather low order. But, as in the first volume, individual lines are eloquent and such a poem as "The Painted Hills of Arizona" startles with an opening figure like, "The rainbows all lie crumpled on these hills." One must overlook much for the sake of such a rhapsodic outburst as:

Sentinel, break the night with a golden spear—
Why does it stand out in the field like one
Who clings to all the earth with craven fear,
Pushing with his shoulder on the rising sun?

Sentinel, unlock the morning from its chains;
Throw by the bolts from off the eastern door;
Unlock that portal hingeing on the plains,
And let the dawn-gate loose its golden store.

Ring out cathedral bells with glorious light.
*Sentinel, lift your spear and break the night!*

"Out of the mouths of babes . . ." And so it is appropriate that this volume should conclude with a consideration of Hilda Conkling who, at the age of thirteen, has two extraordinary books to her credit. To say that Hilda is no highly talented child but an indubitable genius proves nothing. Yet genius is the only thing that can give this girl a sharpness of vision and speed of communication which the most exacting Imagist might envy. When Hilda was not quite ten years old, her *Poems By A Little Girl* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1920) made its appearance. Hilda had already created over a hundred poems; she had begun to write poetry—or rather, to talk it—at the age of four. Hilda "told" her poems, and her mother (the poet Grace Hazard Conkling) made notes or copied them down from memory, arranged the line-divisions, added the titles and read them to Hilda for correction. In such a process there is, of course, the possibility that certain modifications, certain subtle refinements may result; it is even more probable that a tentative and half-conscious shaping has already taken place. But, conceding the natural impress and occasional preconscious echoes of the mother, the quality which shines behind practically all of these facets of loveliness is a directness of perception that has something of divination. It is

its own stamp of unaffected originality, a genuine ingenuousness.

HAY-COCK

This is another kind of sweetness
Shaped like a bee-hive;
This is the hive the bees have left;
It is from this clover-heap
They took away the honey
For the other hive!

"Moon Song," "Red Rooster" and "Spring Song" are breath-snatching fantasies; "Water" takes a lesson in elementary physics and changes it into a revelation.

The world turns softly
Not to spill its lakes and rivers.
The water is held in its arms
And the sky is held in the water.
What is water,
That pours silver,
And can hold the sky?

Here we face the twisted problem of the child as artist. What are the forces that impel it? What supplies it with backgrounds that the child has never known? What directs its candor, sharpens its edges, illumines its clarity? Does the answer lie in its very immaturity? Is the child actually an emotional primitive, still free of superimposed patterns, drawing its substance directly from the unconscious? Knowing beyond knowledge, can it tap that vast source of intuitive wisdom at will?

But this child not only feels and listens with the concentration of a child-artist, she sees and hears with the extraordinary sensitivity of a master-craftsman. She hears the chickadee talking

The way smooth bright pebbles
Drop into water.

She sees that the rooster has a comb "gay as a parade," that there are "pearl trinkets on his feet," that

> The short feathers smooth along his back
> Are the dark color of wet rocks,
> Or the rippled green of ships
> When I look at their sides through water.

Hilda learns much besides her geography from the trees:

> Hemlocks look like Christmas.
> The spruce tree is feathered and rough
> Like the legs of the red chickens in our poultry yard.

She imagines, with amazing precision, that the father of an Indian papoose has a voice

> . . . like ice and velvet,
> And tones of falling water.

She observes

> The water came in with a wavy look
> Like a spider's web.

Hilda Conkling's second volume, *Shoes of the Wind* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1922), was published before its author was thirteen. One thinks of Chatterton, dead at eighteen, with two crowded volumes in the Muses' Library and the mystery of the Rowley forgeries unsolved, of the fifteen-year-old Pamela Bianco whose drawings have the maturity of a master, of Erich Korngold, whose orchestrations at fourteen were more complex than Richard Strauss's. The wonder, however, is not in the fact that these prodigies exist, but that there are not more of them. As musicians, particularly as interpreters, the young Heifetzes often surpass the mature artists in purity of utterance and usually outnumber them—a table of musical

*wunderkinder* beginning with Mozart would run the length of this page. But we cannot quite adjust ourselves to Hilda Conkling, twelve and something, as a serious poet. And yet, as has been remarked before, every young dreamer is not only a potential but a practising poet. The child, confronted with a world of surprises, comes upon them for the first time, sees them vividly and, unless a pattern of thought or phrase is forced upon him, will record them freshly. Unfortunately, the pattern-imposing instinct is strong within us. Parents (proverbially ineffectual teachers) and teachers (harassed, part-time parents) usually conspire to make the imaginative boy exchange his wild fancies for tame formulas, to give up "childish" experiments, to learn routines of conduct, criticism and creation. It is the pressure of custom that first alters, then directs and finally inhibits the creative impulse of most children. What we call the artist is first of all a child who has been lucky enough or strong enough to grow up without having his vision disciplined—and distorted.

If more were to appreciate the tentative expressions of children by pursuing a hands-off policy, there might be many more spontaneous singers as delightful—and as young—as Hilda. For, with her second book, her observations are keener than ever. It is fascinating to watch Hilda while she watches the world; nothing seems to escape her playful scrutiny. Her sense of the exact phrase, her choice of the packed, revealing epithet is amazing. Amy Lowell might have described the flight of pigeons in just such words as

> A cool curving and sliding down the light
> Into wet grass.

But Hilda's gift is not merely visual; her little mind is so busy arranging and decorating what it beholds that the

designs win us, not only by their grace of execution but by their emotional impulse.

> Loveliness that dies when I forget
> Comes alive when I remember.

And she remembers, with exquisite certainty, that

> When moonlight falls on water
> It is like fingers touching the chords of a harp
> On a misty day.
> When moonlight strikes the water
> I cannot get it into my poem:
> I only hear the tinkle of ripplings of light.
> When I see the water's fingers and the moon's rays
> Intertwined,
> I think of all the words I love to hear,
> And try to find words white enough
> For such shining. . . .

Hilda notes, with precise delicacy, that lilies of the valley are "a cluster of bell-shaped moments, doves of time, little white doves," that a shell-pink peony is "Queen Elizabeth in a ruff," that a bough of locust-blossoms "smells like honeysuckle and poppies twined together," that pigeons wading have "feet the color of new June strawberries," that "morning is a picture again with snow-puffed branches" where the sky is "caught like a blue feather in the butter-nut tree," that she has buried her thoughts "in sand: it would take a water-creature to find them," that a blue jay's feet in winter are "snow-dusty" and are "like dull crystal," that "boulders have their minds on the center of the earth," that a Chinese city has a name "like music of gongs struck softly after dark." In "Lilacs," this grace of utterance charms in every line.

> After lilacs come out
> The air loves to flow about them
> The way water in wood-streams
> Flows and loves and wanders.

I think the wind has a sadness
Lifting other leaves, other sprays. . . .
I think the wind is a little selfish
After lilacs come out.

But Hilda's images show other qualities besides her closeness of observation and finesse of phrase; they disclose an imagination both elaborate and *naïve*. Hilda's forte is the decoratively whimsical—as even this tiny fantasy reveals:

DAISIES

Snow-white shawls . . .
Golden faces. . . .
Countryside, hillside, wayside people . . .
Little market-women
Selling dew and yellow flour
To make bread
For some city of elves. . . .

Even if with maturity, Hilda never writes another phrase or, worse, writes thousands of them in the prescribed manner, she is to-day a definite and original figure in contemporary poetry. The fact that she is a child undoubtedly gives her work a particular interest, but the mathematics of age have nothing to do with the summoning of music as beautiful as the epilogue which Hilda speaks with magic and serenity:

TIME

Time is a harp
That plays to you till you fall asleep;
You are always spending it away
Like a music. . . .
Suddenly you are left alone
On a trail of wind.

The mountains were asleep
Long ago!
Listen . . . the tune is changing. . . .

Do you hear it?
You will sleep, too,
Before long. . . .

From Robert Frost to Hilda Conkling—a range and inclusiveness unequaled in America by any other period. With few exceptions, the poetic feeling for ordinary life is manifest everywhere. The contemporary poet knows the health that is at the heart of vulgarity, he reveals the commonplace in shining colors. There are men—and artists—who remain unconscious of these things within their world. But the living poet who desires to escape them is rare Such a baffled spirit is a timorous ghost, dwelling among the half-lights, the broken echoes of poetry, not with poetry itself. For poetry in these days is something more than a graceful escape from life. It is a spirited encounter with it.

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